NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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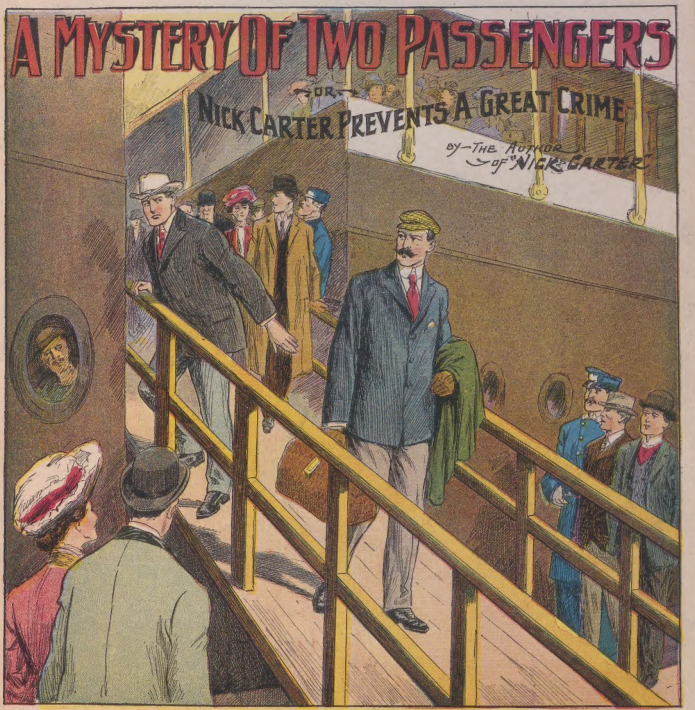
No. 547 NEW YORK, JUNE 22, 1907. Price, Five Cents

A MYSTERY OF TWO PASSENGERS

OR,

NICK CARTER PREVENTS A GREAT CRIME

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



At the sound of the voice from the upper deck Bergen stopped deliberately in the middle of the plank, while Nick watched closely his every movement.

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A MYSTERY OF TWO PASSENGERS

OR,

Nick Carter Prevents a Great Crime.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A PLOT FOR TWO MILLIONS.

Nick Carter half-opened his eyes sleepily, conscious that something had been said that should be of interest to him, and yet not conscious of what it was; and then, as he heard no further sound of voices, he closed them again, and dozed off once more.

But suddenly he was startled wide awake by a spoken sentence which seemed to have been uttered directly into his ear. It was:

"He is worth two million, at least, and probably more than that, and if you play your part as you should do it and can do it, we'll have the boodle inside of six months."

Again the detective raised himself to his elbow in the berth, and listened—and again he could hear no further sound of conversation.

He pressed his ear against the bulkhead, but nothing more ominous than a gentle snore came from the adjoining stateroom.

"That's odd," he mused, now thoroughly wide awake. "I wonder if I could have been dreaming? No; I know better than that. It was no dream. It was a voice. And that other voice I heard a little while ago belonged to a woman. This time it was a man who spoke."

He got out of his berth and listened at the opposite bulkhead, but no sound whatever came to him from that side.

"It's mighty strange," he mused, as he returned to his berth. "I could swear——"

He stopped suddenly, for when he put his head again upon the pillow, he was instantly conscious of the sound of the murmur of voices, and he listened almost breathlessly.

Where did they come from? He could not answer that, for he had no idea.

Again he raised himself to his elbow, and again he heard nothing. Once more he dropped his head upon his pillow, and once more that soft murmur of voices came to him.

He tried this several times, and each time with precisely the same result. When his head was upon the pillow he could hear the low murmur of voices, although he could distinguish no individual word that was uttered; when he raised his head from the pillow, he could hear nothing at all save the general sounds of a steamer in

motion, the throbbing of the engines, and the breathing of the mechanical leviathan.

He had taken the last stateroom that was to be had aboard the boat, and in alloting it to him, the purser had remarked:

"It is the only room I have left, Mr. Carter, or I would not give it to you. You see, the hog-frame of the vessel runs through that room, and the consequence is that the berth is short."

"Oh, well," Nick had replied, "I am not very tall, and I guess I can make it go. It is better than sitting up all night, or taking a berth in the cabin—which I wouldn't do. I'll crowd into it, Mr. Pike."

"It possesses one advantage," the purser told him, as he handed him the key. "There is no upper berth over you. There is only the one berth in the room; but as I said before, it is considerably shorter than the regulation. I never give out that room without explaining about it, so that there will be no kick coming afterward."

To return:

Each time that he raised his head from the pillow, he could hear nothing save the general noises of a vessel in motion; each time he rested his head upon the pillow, he was thoroughly conscious of the murmur of voices—somewhere.

Where? They did not proceed from the stateroom on either side of him.

It was a puzzle which he was determined to solve—if a solution was possible, and in order to think it over with deliberation, he now stretched himself flat upon his back.

His berth was short, it will be remembered, and his feet pressed against the outboard extremity of it. Feeling the pressure, he did a very natural thing—he "stretched" his body preparatory to indulging in a deep sigh of restful content.

But the sigh died in its inception. A part of the mystery, at least, was solved in that instant.

In stretching his body, the top of his head had come in contact with that same hog-frame mentioned by the purser, and instantly the murmur of distant voices resolved itself into a tangible conversation.

"By Jove!" he muttered; then he listened—listened with the top of his head pressed firmly against the hog-frame of the vessel.

But he discovered, much to his chagrin, that he was too late for the details of the plot that had been hatched between the man and the woman who were doing the talking, and he accused himself of stupidity because he had not at once guessed where that conductor of sound was located.

Still, what he was hearing now was not uninteresting. He had tripped one sentence, in the middle of it. It was spoken by the woman. She was saying:

"——easy for you to stand aside and look on while I do all the work. I'll agree to the first half of it, but I'll tell you right now, Birge, that I will have nothing to do with the rest of it. More than that, I insist that I shall know nothing about it."

"Oh, that will be all right," said the voice of the man; and the woman went on:

"When the time comes to put him out of business, you've got to do it without consulting me, and without letting me know anything about it."

"You will know, just the same, who did it, and you will be just as much an accomplice as——"

"No, I won't! I sha'n't know anything about it at all. If I find him dead some morning, or some afternoon, that is your business, not mine. Only——"

"Well?"

"You must be mighty sure that the boodle end of it is all right before anything of that kind is done. Oh, Birge! Let's try some other way. I can't bear the idea of becoming the wife of that man when I am *your* wife all the time. How can I give myself to him, and try to look happy and be vivacious, when all the time I love only you?"

"But aren't you proving your love for me by doing it, Rita?"

"Proving it! As if you needed any proof of that!"

"To be sure, I don't need proof. But look at it sensibly. We live from hand to mouth, now. Sometimes I'm flush, with a few hundreds or thousands in my jeans, and then we travel and enjoy ourselves. Then again I'm broke, and there's nothing doing. We have to live in a third-rate boarding-house, pawn our diamonds, and do any old thing to get along."

"I know. I know."

"And now this scheme crops up. In six months at the most—perhaps within three months from this very day—we can be worth anywhere from two to four millions. And after that—— Why, Rita, I'll give up everything that's crooked. I'll live the simple life, so far as any sort of graft is concerned. We'll own our private yacht—I think he's got one now—and I'll devote the rest of my life to you. I tell you, Rita, it is a game worth playing for."

"I know. I know," she said. "But I have got to take another man for my husband while I am *your* wife. You don't realize the horror of that, Birge."

"Yes, I do, too. Do you suppose that I *like* to have you do such a thing? Do you suppose that I would willingly give you up to another if the stakes weren't so high and if I did not see years of happiness for us both after it?"

"N-no. But, Birge, dear——"

"Well?"

"Isn't there some other way to—to end it all, without—without mur——"

"Hush, you fool!"

"Well, that is what it would be if you should poison him or——"

"Shut up, will you?"

"I know they are ugly words, dear. Isn't there some other way than that, dear?"

"Oh, well; maybe we can find one. Anyhow, we haven't got to that bridge yet. There is no use trying to cross it till we do."

"But I don't want to cross it; I want to stay this side of it. I don't want you to commit such a crime or even to think of doing it. It would be sure to be found out—and then think what the consequences would be. If you will promise me that you won't do that, I will go ahead with all the rest of it, horrible as it is to my personal feelings. Promise me, won't you, Birge?"

"But if I promise you such a thing as that, how are we to get rid of the duffer, when the time comes to rid ourselves of him? You don't suppose that I'm going to give you up to him indefinitely, do you?"

"No; oh, no; not that."

"And where does our private yacht come in, and all that goes with it—where does our big fortune come in, and all the years of happiness and wealth we propose to have afterward, together, unless we rid ourselves of him at the right moment?"

"I know. I know; but there will be another way."

"I don't see it."

"There will be. Promise me that you won't commit that horrible crime of——"

"There, now!"

"I'm going to say it whether you like it or not, for that is what it is. It is a good deal better to have me say it to you now than to have twelve men in a jury-box say it to you a year from now."

"Confound you, Rita!"

"I'm only putting things plainly, dear, that's all. To plot and plan to put a man to death, no matter how, is murder. You can't call it by any other name. I won't be a party to it because I won't let you do it. Birge, unless you make me the solemn promise that I demand, I shall refuse to have anything more to do with it. So, there!"

There was an interval of silence after that; but at last the voice of the man spoke again.

"All right, Rita," he said. "I'll make the promise. I won't poison him, or stab him, or shoot him, or knock him on the head. I won't kill him, no matter what happens. Now, are you satisfied with that?"

"Yes, Birge. I am satisfied with that. And I am *so* glad you have promised. You will stand to your word, won't you, Birge?"

"Did you ever know me to go back on my word to you, Rita?"

"No; never."

"Well, I won't do it this time. I'll stand to what I say, provided that you'll go right ahead at once with the rest of the scheme. Will you do that, and not make any more objections, Rita?"

"Yes."

"That's on the level now, is it, Rita?"

"Yes."

"And you will open the campaign at once? At once, Rita?"

"Yes, dear."

"Shake on that, girl, and kiss me good night. I'm going to sleep now. What time is it?"

"It is almost three o'clock."

"Well, it's time we were both asleep. I suppose I ought to say 'good morning,' but I like the sound of 'good night' better. Good night, Rita."

"Good night, dear."

CHAPTER II.

A PUZZLING PHENOMENON.

It is needless to say that Nick Carter had no more sleep that night.

As soon as he was satisfied that there was to be no further conversation between the two conspirators, he turned on the electric lights in his room and began what he called a systematic study of the situation.

He first gave his attention to the hog-frame of the vessel, for unmistakably that particular part of her construction had provided the conductor of sound by which he had been able to overhear the amazing conversation.

In some mysterious manner, it had acted the part of a telephone. For some reason, at present inexplicable, the hog-frame had been the means of bringing to him, clearly and distinctly, each word of a conversation carried on in some other part of the vessel; and a conversation which he knew was carried on in a tone so low as to have been inaudible in the rooms adjoining the one where it took place.

Nick Carter had heard it through the top of his head. Stop up your ears as tightly as you may and then press your watch against the top of your head; you will hear it tick as distinctly as if you had held it at your open ear.

The voices had been so low—almost in whispers parts of the time—that he could not hope to recognize either of them if he should hear them again, speaking in natural tones.

All the information that he possessed was that the plotters were a man and a woman, and that their names were respectively Birge and Rita.

He could infer from what he had heard that the woman was young and—well, interesting, if not beautiful; that the man was one who made his living in precarious ways.

He had not stated exactly that he was a crook, but

he had inferred quite plainly that he made his living by his wits.

There were times when he was flush and times when he was broke. He might be a gambler, or a book-maker; he might be a burglar—one of those anomalies that are called "gentlemen burglars." He might, in fact, be almost anything except an honest man.

He was one, too, who was not inclined to balk at murder—if murder should be necessary to his schemes.

Nick took no stock in that promise he had made to his wife. He had promised that *he* would not commit the greater crime; he had made no promise that he would not have it done; and, after all, the promise itself was worth nothing. The mere fact that the woman believed him counted for nothing.

He had understood that she would throw over the whole plan unless he made that promise—and so he made it, doubtless with no idea whatever of adhering to it.

And who could this intended victim be? This man who was worth from two to four millions, who owned a private yacht, and who was already—to judge from their conversation—half in their toils? Who was he?

Nick tried to think if there was a passenger who answered to that description aboard the vessel, but he could not fix upon one.

Then he tried to picture in his mind, one by one, each of the passengers, seeking in his thought to find a man and wife among them who might be the Birge and Rita he had heard conversing, but again he was at fault.

This was the fourth and last night at sea for that voyage; indeed, they should have been in port at New York the preceding evening but for a storm off Hatteras that had delayed them. He knew they were due at the dock about six or seven o'clock, and he realized that there would be no time and no opportunity to study the passengers from this new standpoint.

If only that conversation had come to him forty-eight, or even twenty-four hours earlier.

But it did not.

The morning of arrival in port is a busy one for the officers of a ship. The purser would have no time to devote to him; the passengers—that is, many of them—would leave the vessel as soon as she touched at the wharf. There would be some who would take breakfast on board, but there would be many who would not.

There would be no opportunity for the detective to study them; true, he could get the passenger-list from the purser and copy it. The purser was his friend, and would willingly permit him to do that.

But already Nick thought he knew every passenger aboard the ship.

He could pass them in review—every one in his mind's eye before him—but he could not fix his mind upon any woman among them who might be "Rita," or upon any man among them who seemed likely to be "Birge."

It was an amazing situation, and the more he thought upon it the more amazing it became.

There were three women aboard the vessel who might be placed in the category of beautiful—that is, attractively beautiful. That word is a very elastic one. It does not always comprehend the same idea, when two persons view it.

And then, again, the three women aboard the ship who might be placed in its category were none of them married. One was traveling with her father, who was a college professor; another was with her mother, who was a sedate, dignified old lady of the old-school type; the third was accompanied by a middle-aged maid and also by a man servant, who acted as courier. He had understood that she was a very wealthy heiress returning from Florida to rejoin her parents, who were returning from Europe at the same time.

There was no married couple aboard the ship who answered to the requirements of his mental investigation. There were several, to be sure, but Nick felt that he could account for each of them sufficiently well to answer for it that they were not the ones he had heard conversing.

Altogether, the situation was most puzzling.

When he considered the men separately, he was as deeply puzzled as ever.

He had chatted with nearly all of them since they left Jacksonville; he had exchanged cards with many of them, as passengers aboard a ship are prone to do.

There had been no gambling on that voyage. The smoking-room had been deserted most of the time save by two or three who remained in it almost all the time, and smoked pipes.

Nick Carter never traveled without making a study of his fellow passengers. It was a favorite amusement of his even when there was no professional onus upon him to do it.

This voyage had been no exception to his general habit. He had studied his fellow-passengers with the same zeal that he always did, and he had not found one among them who had impressed him as being any different from the representations made.

There was only one *young* husband and wife aboard the ship, and they were bride and groom returning from their honeymoon. They were out of the question entirely. They were too young, too unsophisticated, too transparent.

"For a little thing," he mused, as he dressed himself, "it is about the biggest mystery I ever tackled."

When he left his room and went upon the deck, the ship was almost at the Narrows; the morning was cold and raw, and a sharp sleet was falling, although it was then late in March.

After a little he went below and tapped upon the

purser's door, knowing that that official would be busy at his desk, and doubtless had been so most of the night.

The door was opened somewhat impatiently, but when the purser saw who it was, he exclaimed warmly:

"Come in—come in, Mr. Carter;" and Nick passed inside and closed the door.

"I don't want to bother you at all," said the detective. "I know you are up to your ears in work. I only want you to let me look over the passenger-list; will you?"

"Sure. Here it is."

"And—one thing more, and I won't say another word—after you have been ashore and handed over your manifest and papers, I want just about five minutes' conversation with you, if I may have it. I'll wait aboard the ship for you."

"All right, Mr. Carter."

Nick gave his attention then to the passenger-list, and he copied it into a note-book, name for name, to the end; then he put the list back on the desk beside the purser.

But he sat for a long time studying the names he had copied, and picturing the owner of each one in his mind as he conned it.

He found, however, that he was just as much at fault as ever—found that he was no nearer a solution of the difficulty than before; found that the mystery remained as profound.

After a little he put the note-book in his pocket, and silently left the purser's office, crossing the deck to the port quarter, where he tapped upon the door of the chief engineer's room.

A hearty voice bade him enter, and he found the chief engaged in shaving.

"Hello, Carter!" exclaimed that officer. "Or rather, good morning. We'll soon be in port now. Sit down and make yourself at home."

"I suppose you are going ashore as soon as we get into port, aren't you?" asked Nick.

"Just the very first minute that I can get away—yes, sirree!" was the reply.

"Can you take time now, then, to answer a few questions for me?" continued the detective.

"I guess so. What are they?"

"The first one is, what do you know about hog-frames?"

"Eh? What's that?"

"Hog-frames. What do you know about them?"

"I'm not a naval constructor, old man. I'm a chief engineer. Hog-frames, I believe, bear the same relation to a vessel that braces do to a building. They are like the supports of a bridge across a stream—the upper works, so to speak, to which the bridge hangs. They extend fore and aft, and not only support the superstructure, but stiffen the ship and make her seaworthy. What in blazes are you getting at, anyhow?"

"Did you ever happen to hear of a hog-frame of a vessel that acted as a telephone?" asked the detective quietly; and the chief engineer lifted the razor from his face and turned slowly around in astonishment.

"Look here, Carter," he said. "You had better change your diet, or your drinks, or something. You're not well."

"I'm in dead earnest, chief."

"Oh! Are you? Well, then, I never did."

"If I'll tell you a little secret, chief, will you promise to keep dead still about it, and help me unravel it? I'm not joking."

"I certainly will, Carter. What's up?"

"You know that I have got room three hundred and nine, don't you?"

"Yes; that room with the short berth. What of it?"

"The hog-frame runs through that room."

"I know that. It is the reason for the short berth—and only one berth in the room."

"Does that same hog-frame run through any other room on the ship, and make another short berth?"

"Why?"

"Never mind. Answer my question."

"Why, it runs through other rooms, I suppose—I know it does, in fact; but that is the only one where it shortens the berths."

"Well, you are an engineer, and here is a problem for you. I want you to think it over till after breakfast, and then answer it—if you can."

"Go ahead. You're mighty mysterious this morning."

"Can you conceive of any reason why that particular hog-frame that runs through my room should be transformed into a conductor of sound, and transformed so perfectly that a conversation carried on in another room at a distant part of the ship should be transmitted to me as plainly as if I held a telephone-receiver at my ear? And that, notwithstanding the fact that the conversation was carried on almost in whispers—or rather in low murmurs?

"Don't answer me now; give me your answer after breakfast. For I tell you, chief, that is exactly what has happened."

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERY OF TWO PASSENGERS.

The detective rose to take his departure, but the chief engineer would have none of that. His curiosity had been too greatly aroused.

"Hold on, then!" he said. "You are not going off like that after what you have said. Is this some sort of a joke that you are putting up on me, or are you in earnest?"

"I never spoke more seriously in my life."

"I guess you were dreaming, Nick."

"I happen to know that I was not dreaming; that I was as wide awake as I am now."

"What were they talking about?"

"I would rather not tell you that, just at present, if you don't mind. I'll promise to do so later."

"Who was talking?"

"That is precisely what I want to find out. I'd give a hundred—no, I'd make it a thousand dollars—to know positively who it was that was talking."

"And you heard distinctly?"

"Every word that was said—and their words were uttered in murmuring tones, scarcely louder than whispers. I doubt if the people in the adjoining rooms to them were aware even of the murmur of voices near them."

"What makes you think the hog-frame had anything to do with it?"

"For the reason that I could hear nothing at all only when the top of my head was pressed against the hog-frame."

"I suppose you are quite sure about that?"

"I am positive about it. I tried it over and over again. When my head was away from the hog-frame, I could hear nothing. When my head was pressed against it, I could hear every word they said."

"Who was talking? Two men, or two women, or what?"

"A man and a woman."

"You won't tell me what they were talking about?"

"Not now. I will later."

"Something criminal, I suppose, from your evident interest in the matter, eh?"

"Yes; decidedly so."

"A man and a woman, eh? A man and his wife, I suppose?"

"Yes; they admitted as much as that to each other."

"Then it ought to be easy, Nick. The passenger-list will tell you of every room aboard the ship that is occupied by a man and his wife—and there aren't more than four or five such couples in the bunch. I should think——"

"I have a copy of the passenger-list in my pocket. I have been over it thoroughly. I am entirely satisfied that it is none of those."

"But, man, how the blazes——"

"Wait a minute, chief. I think I can answer that ques-

"Go ahead, then."

"I answer it like this: There is aboard this ship a man and his wife who do not so appear on the passenger-list. They have taken passage apparently unknown to each other. They had a very good reason for doing so, and they still have that very good reason. It was necessary, however, that they should have a conference before they reached New York, and, accordingly, last night one of them visited the other one."

"You mean that the husband probably visited his wife's room in order to hold that very consultation that you overheard?"

"Yes; or she went to his room. It is one way or the other. That is the only method of accounting for it."

"I wish you would tell me more about it."

"I will tell you this much: They have formed a conspiracy against a rich man, to get his money away from him. I need not tell you now just how it is to be done, but it is as vile a plot as I ever listened to."

"Weren't any names mentioned?"

"No. He answers to the name of Birge; she answers to the name of Rita."

"Aren't there any such names on the passenger-list?"

"No; nothing that resembles them."

"And you have no idea who the victim is to be?"

"None, save that he is a rich man who is either a bachelor or a widower—and probably lives in New York."

"You have no idea, I suppose, whether these two whom you heard talking are young or old?"

"I should judge from the nature of the conversation that the woman is rather young and is at least attractive—if not decidedly beautiful."

"There isn't a really beautiful woman on board, Nick."

"That is as you view it."

"There are three very pretty young women—very charming ones—but it couldn't be one of them."

"I know to whom you refer. One is the daughter of a college professor, and we know all about her. She certainly cannot be considered."

"That's right. And Miss Porter is traveling with her mother—I have talked a good bit with the old lady, and I think I may say that I know all about them; that is, all that is necessary."

"What do you know about the third one?" asked Nick.

"Miss Mallory? Oh, well, we must dismiss her as a possibility. She has her maid and her courier—or footman, whichever you call him—with her, and she is an heiress—a rich woman. Besides, she went down with us, two months ago. She's all right. I'd swear to that. Why, the very idea of thinking of her is preposterous."

"So it seems in considering any of the women passengers; but all the same, the one I refer to is somewhere aboard this ship. Let us, for the sake of passing the time, pursue the subject of Miss Mallory a little bit further."

"Go ahead."

"You say she went down with you two months ago?"

"Yes."

"Is there a gentleman passenger aboard this ship now who was also on that voyage? Try to remember. It may be important."

"No. I am positive there is not one."

"Do you know where she went?"

"To Palm Beach, I think. I am sure, in fact. She told me that she had been there all the while."

"I have noticed, chief, that you are about the only man aboard the ship from whom she has permitted herself to receive any attention. She has kept very much to herself, but I have seen you talking to her frequently. Tell me something about her."

"There isn't anything to tell, Nick. She told me on the voyage down that her father and mother were traveling in Europe, but that she preferred to go to Florida. On the trip up she has told me that she is to meet them at the Hotel Mammoth, in New York. They were due, I think, yesterday, or the day before. Anyhow, she expects to find them there when she arrives. I don't see what you want to fix upon her for."

"I haven't fixed upon her, or upon anybody. I am simply trying to find out all that I can about *all* of the passengers."

"Oh, well, you can't consider her."

"All the same, she answers to all the physical requirements of the case."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that she is a very charming, very attractive, almost a beautiful woman; that she is probably somewhere between twenty-two and thirty years old——"

"Twenty-four, she told me."

"Did it get as far as that? I mean also that, according to the plot as hatched—as I overheard it, a young, charming, attractive, almost a beautiful woman, would be required to fill the bill. What is her given name, chief?"

"Imogene."

"What is her father's business? Has she told you that?"

"He used to be an engineer—a civil engineer, I mean; but he is now retired. They are very wealthy."

"Did she also tell you that?"

"No; but I can assume it from many things that she has said."

"Does her maid occupy the room with her?"

"No; the one adjoining—or rather it is directly across the hall from hers."

"What is the number of her room? Do you know that?"

"Yes. It is twenty-three."

"Does the hog-frame run through that room?"

"I think it does; but I am equally sure that it does not touch either of the berths. In fact, it is several feet from them."

"I am not assuming, chief, that those two people whom I heard conversing were in a berth while they talked. In fact, I am quite sure that they must have been seated in chairs facing each other, with their heads close together. Now, let us leave Miss Mallory for the present."

"I shall be only too happy to do so, for I tell you frankly that I don't like your insinuations against her."

"My dear fellow, nothing could be further from my thoughts than to make the least suggestion of an insinuation against her. I am really trying to eliminate her from the possibility of being the woman in question."

"I am glad of that."

"But we mustn't forget the fact that there *is* a woman."

"No."

"And also that there is a man."

"Can you pick out the man, Nick?"

"No more than I can the woman."

"Didn't he say anything at all during that conversation which would give you any clue to go by?"

"Only one thing. He referred to himself as a man who was frequently flush and as frequently broke. He as much as said that he lives by his wits, but whether as a gambler, or as a thief of some sort or a forger, I could not gather. Now, is there any passenger aboard this ship at the present moment whom you know to be a gambler?"

"No."

"Have any of the male passengers who are here now, traveled with you before?"

"Yes. Three of them."

"Who are they?"

"You are one——"

"Oh, pshaw!"

"——and there are Melville Bergen and Horace Moore. I know them both quite well. Mr. Bergen has been up and down with us many times."

"Melville Bergen—oh, yes. He is the handsome fellow with the black mustache. What is his business? I don't think I have talked with him much."

"He has some tobacco interests at Tampa. He is interested in one of the cigar factories down there. A fine fellow he is, too. Moore I don't know so well. He is a jeweler, however; that is a traveling salesman for some big jewelry concern."

"There is the breakfast gong, chief. Answer that question about the hog-frame for me after your breakfast, will you?"

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER'S TWO GREAT TESTS.

Nick Carter stood at the gangway door when the passengers began to leave the ship.

He did it unostentatiously, for he did not wish it to appear that he was watching for anybody or anything; but he had formed a plan which he hoped would be productive of results.

He was leaning against the rail, just outside the door, out of the way of the passengers who were leaving the ship; and if you had noticed him closely, you would have seen that he was holding fast to a slender cord which descended into his hand from the upper deck.

Directly over his head, on the upper deck, and of

course out of sight of any of the passengers who were going ashore, was one of the negro room stewards of the vessel whom Nick had subsidized with the biggest single fee he had ever received—a twenty-dollar bill.

The other end of the cord which Nick held in his hand was tied around the wrist of the negro, but just why that had been done will develop as we proceed.

The detective's official household, of course, were informed of his expected arrival in port that morning, and as he had been absent from home some little time, it was only natural that Patsy and Ten-Ichi should have come to the steamer to meet him; and they had come aboard the very minute the gangplank was put out from the dock.

Nick had greeted them happily—and also hastily.

"Get ashore, lads, both of you," he had said to them as soon as the greetings were over. "It may be that I shall want to use you both. There is a man and a woman aboard this ship about whom I want some information. The only thing about it is, that I am not at all sure who they are. Patsy, the woman will be yours."

"All right. How am I to know her?"

"This way: If I sing out to you, *'How is Johnnie?'* you will know that she is coming down the gangplank toward you, and if there is more than one woman on the plank at the time, you will know that she is the leading one. If she should happen to be the second or third woman on the plank—from you—at the time, I will say, *'How is Johnnie Number Two?'*—or three, as the case may be. Are you on?"

"Yes."

"Well, take the trail, find out all you can about her, and when you are sure that you have got her fixed for the day, go home and report to me. Now, Ten-Ichi."

"Yes."

"It will be the man for yours."

"All right."

"When I think I see him on the gangplank, I will call out to you, *'Who won the first prize?'* or the second prize, or the third prize, according to his position on the plank."

"All right, sir. That's easy."

"Your instructions are the same as Patsy's. Now, get ashore, both of you."

And now we must remember that such was the situation when Nick stood at the rail near the door, holding to the cord which ascended to the negro's wrist on the upper deck. He was hoping that the woman whom he now suspected would be the first one of the two to leave the ship.

She was.

She came out through the door, accompanied by her maid and footman, within a very few minutes after Nick had taken up his position. She bade good-by to the purser and the chief steward, who stood inside near the door, and she nodded and smiled a good-by to Nick Carter whom, of course, she knew only as Mr. Carter, a New York business man.

Her attendants were laden with rugs and bags, and followed her closely.

Nick looked around as she came out at the door, and was pleased to notice that the man whose name was Melville Bergen was standing at the opposite side of the ship, talking with the chief engineer. Things were working exactly as he had hoped they might.

He watched Miss Mallory vacantly, and when she was exactly at the center of the gangplank, going down, he gave *two sharp jerks upon the cord he held in his hand.*

Instantly from directly over the detective's head a musical, masculine voice called out:

"Oh, Rita!"

The detective's eyes were upon the woman when that call came.

He saw that she stopped dead still in her tracks—for just the fraction of an instant; and then she went on again as unconcerned as ever.

But the detective had seen enough to convince him that he was not entirely wrong in his surmises, and, acting at once, he called out:

"Ten-Ichi, how is Johnnie?" He addressed Ten-Ichi because he knew that Miss Mallory would naturally look at any one who replied to the question—and Patsy was to follow her. The detective did not wish her to spot him so early in the game.

Ten-Ichi, taking the cue, replied at once: "He's all right. Fine."

The young woman continued on her way to a cab that was in waiting for her, followed by her maid and her footman—and Patsy disappeared from view at the same time.

"So far, so good," murmured the detective to himself; and he glanced across through the gangway to the other side of the ship and saw that Bergen was still talking with the chief and had not heard.

Nick had argued to himself that these two were the most likely ones aboard the vessel; also that Imogene might easily be an assumed name, or that Rita might as easily be a pet name; also that the name Bergen is sometimes pronounced with a soft *g*, like *j*, and that therefore it might easily be shortened into Birge.

At all events, it was worth a trial, and he had resolved to test it.

True enough, at the call of "Rita," Miss Mallory had neither turned nor responded in any way; but the name had fallen upon her ears with something of a shock; Nick was assured of that.

She had stopped for a brief instant only, but she had stopped still in her tracks at the sound of it. The two servants had seemed not to notice it at all.

It was almost a half-hour later before Melville Bergen left the ship; but at last he appeared with his big Gladstone bag in hand, and hurried ashore. He had been dispensing gratuities around him liberally, and was too busy to see Nick at all as he hastened past.

The detective was glad of that. It would have been awkward for him to shake hands with that cord in his hand, and he did not wish to let go of it.

When he was part way down the plank, Nick gave one quick jerk upon the cord.

Instantly from the upper deck that same melodious voice called out loudly:

"I say! *Berge, old man!*"

Bergen stopped deliberately in the middle of the plank, turned squarely around and looked the ship over, giving his chiefest attention to the upper deck, from whence the voice had come; but Nick knew that the negro was obeying instructions, and must be already diligently polishing the door-knobs behind him, for he had loosed the cord and it had been pulled up out of sight as soon as the call was made.

The detective was watching Bergen now, before he should give the signal to Ten-Ichi, for the deliberate action of the man surprised him. At least, he was not at all afraid of the sound of that particular name.

And after a moment he actually reascended the plank and returned to the deck.

"Did some one call me?" he asked politely of Nick, as he approached him.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the detective.

"I thought it was the chief; I thought I heard the chief call me. Somebody certainly used the abbreviation of my name."

"The chief was here a moment ago. I think he is in his room," said Nick.

"Then it could not have been he; however, I'll go and find out. Beastly morning, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

Bergen hastened across the ship, and Nick, instead of calling the agreed-upon question to Ten-Ichi, motioned to him to come aboard—and then he met him at the top of the gangplank.

"That's your man," he said to him. "Now get ashore; and bring me a full report of him."

The detective was back again inside the ship before Bergen came out of the chief engineer's room.

"Aren't you going ashore yet?" he said to Nick, stopping directly in front of him.

"No. Not at once. I expected some friends down—and the chief and I have a few good-bys to say to each other yet. So-long, Mr. Bergen."

He watched Bergen as he went ashore, this time without stopping, and then he also turned to go to the chief's room.

"He's a cool proposition, anyhow," was his mental comment. "I wish I could feel sure that I am right. But if I am, the thing now is to find the prospective victim. However, sooner or later, if I am right about the woman, she will lead us to him."

He found the chief busily engaged in making preparations to go ashore, for a chief engineer's duties end with the docking of the ship, unless there are repairs to be made.

"Well, old man," he said, "have you found an answer to that question of mine?"

"I think I have found a partial one, Nick."

"Good! Let's hear it."

"I have been below, looking over things a little. I have also followed the hog-frame from one end of the ship to the other. My answer must be entirely a theoretical one, and it may not hold water at all. In fact, I am inclined to think that a practical electrician would be inclined to call it utter nonsense."

"Never mind that. Let us hear it."

"Well, for one thing, I have traced out a metal connection—brass and iron—between the bed-plate under one of my dynamos, and that hog-frame that traverses your room. Now, to my mind, it is possible that enough electricity may have escaped—you know it does escape from a dynamo and will ruin a watch if you stand near enough?"

"Yes."

"I think it possible that enough may have escaped to partly charge that metal. And now, let us follow the hog-frame."

"Yes."

"It is not bound with metal the entire length, of course; but all the same there is iron of all sorts bolted fast to it, at short distances, its entire length."

"Naturally."

"It is my opinion that under certain atmospheric conditions, it might become a conductor of sound, like a telephone-wire. I don't say that it would be so; I don't even say that it could be so, for I don't know; but it is my opinion, since what you told me, that it might be so."

"Suppose we test it, chief."

"How will we do that?"

"Here is the key to my room—three hundred and nine. You go up there, stretch out on the berth, and press the top of your head against that hog-frame. I'll go somewhere else in the ship, and see if I can call you up."

"All right."

"If you don't hear anything at all within five minutes after you get there, come back to your room. I'll meet you here."

Nick watched the chief disappear up the stairs, and then he hastened to room 23. There he leaned his own head against the hog-frame and called out, "Hello, chief!"

He repeated it three times, and each time listened for a reply.

Receiving nothing, he gave up the attempt, and returned to the chief's room.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked, as soon as the chief entered.

"Not a thing, Nick; but we were foolish to try it under the circumstances, anyhow."

"Why so?"

"Simply because the dynamo isn't running. Don't you see that that is a necessary part of it? Just wait till we get to sea again, and I'll make the test, all right. But tell me to what room you went."

"I went to twenty-three, chief. I think—never mind what I think. Only I want you to promise to keep this affair to yourself."

CHAPTER V.

PATSY MAKES HIS REPORT.

"Well, Patsy?"

It was half-past ten o'clock in the evening of the same day. Nick Carter was seated in his study and Patsy had just entered. The detective had not seen him since they parted at the wharf after the docking of the steamer.

"I can't imagine for the life of me what you wanted that woman followed for?" said Patsy, with some disgust in his tone.

"Why not?"

"Because there isn't anything about her to follow."

"Why," replied Nick, laughing, "she seemed to me to be quite substantial."

"Aw, well, you know what I mean, all right. Why, say, chief, those people are just wallowing in money, if one is to judge from appearances."

"All this, Patsy, isn't giving me your report."

"Well, the lady with the velvet eyes—that's what I called her—took a cab at the dock and drove as straight as a string for the Holland House. She——"

"For the *Holland* House?"

"Yes. That's what I said. She did not remain there."

"All right. Go on."

"She got out and went inside, where she wrote a letter, which she stamped with a stamp that she took from her purse, and which she dropped in the mail-box herself, so there was no opportunity to find out to whom it was addressed."

"I think I could supply that information, and also tell you approximately what the letter contained. But go on."

"I suppose you refer to that call from the upper deck of the ship that held her up for a minute on the gang-plank, eh?"

"Yes."

"And the letter was probably sent to the man whom Ten-Ichi followed, to tell him about that incident?"

"That is my idea."

"Well, she wrote the letter, anyhow, and mailed it. Then she returned to her cab, and drove to the Mammoth."

"Well?"

"At the Mammoth they took her things out of the cab and carried them inside; they she received her trunk-checks; and while she was standing in the office of the hotel, giving directions about what she wanted done with things, an old gentleman, who looks as if he might have been a colonel in the English army, rushed up to her, and took her in his arms, and kissed her, and called her Imogene, and asked her what sort of a time she had had—and all that and a lot more."

"Go on."

"She talked as fast as he did. She asked the old man, whom she called papa, if they had had a pleasant time on the other side; and how was mama; and, altogether it was just a common, every-day, ordinary meeting between a father and daughter who had been separated for a considerable time."

"You think it was all genuine, do you, Patsy?"

"I think it was. If it was not, it was about the best piece of acting I ever saw."

"And then——"

"Then the old man carried her off up-stairs, and I didn't see any of them again for two hours. I thought of coming and reporting, then; and then again I thought I would hold on for a while."

"You did right. What happened after two hours?"

"The old man came down-stairs alone and went into the café. I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep a weather eye on him, so I followed."

"Quite right."

"Say, chief, did you ever see a human tank?"

"Lots of them, Patsy."

"Well, he is one if ever there was one. I'll give you my word that he drank up a whole bottle of whisky in less than an hour, and it never touched him."

"What next?"

"He went up in the elevator again, and I adopted one of the wallflower chairs for mine. Two hours more had skipped away, and I began to get uneasy with nothing whatever to do."

"Wait a minute. Hadn't you made any inquiries at the desk?"

"Not yet. Sammy—the clerk who is friendly to me—had not come on duty yet. I thought it best to wait for him."

"Go ahead."

"When that two hours were up—that made five since I entered the hotel—I thought I'd stroll around a bit, and after a little I went over into the Egyptian room,

and there was my lady, chatting as cozy as you please with a fine-looking chap. They were away over in one corner of the room where I couldn't get near enough to them to hear anything that was said, but——"

"Describe the man, Patsy."

"He was a tall, handsome fellow, with a black mustache and gray eyes; dressed like a swell of the first water, and carried himself like a prince."

"Did he have any particular habit or motion that you noticed, Patsy?"

"Yes; one."

"What was it? Or, stay, let me ask you."

"Well?"

"Did he, every little while, snap the middle finger of his right hand against the ball of his thumb, as if he were knocking off a speck of dust, or something of the sort?"

"That is the chap. I guess you're on, all right."

"Where was Ten-Ichi?"

"Eh? I didn't see Ten-Ichi."

"That was the man Ten-Ichi was to follow."

"Oh! I see."

"Were the two talking very earnestly together?"

"Apparently so. They were quite serious part of the time. They acted to me as if they were very much puzzled about something. The young woman was evidently finding a lot of objections to something that the man wanted her to do—and finally he convinced her, whatever it was."

"They were puzzled about those calls from the upper deck of the ship, Patsy. She wrote the note to him at the Holland House to tell him what had happened to her, and when they got together they discovered that the same thing had happened to him. It troubled them."

"Do you mean to tell me that those two people are crooks, chief?"

"They are in a fair way to become crooks, if they are not so already."

"It is hard to believe. I thought I could about tell a crook when I see one, but——"

"Go on with your story. It must have been about two or three o'clock this afternoon at the time you mention. It is half-past ten at night now. What has happened in the meantime?"

"They stuck together in the Egyptian room for about an hour, and then the man went away, and she went aloft in the elevator again."

"You saw nothing of Ten-Ichi all that time?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, what next?"

"I went back to the desk, and found that Sammy was there, so I watched my chance and called him to one side; and by great good luck the young woman's father was passing along through the office at just that moment. I asked Sammy who he was."

"Well?"

"He said he was General James Mallory, a distinguished civil engineer; had been at the hotel three days; just come from abroad—Russia, he thought. Had his wife with him, and was expecting his daughter from the South. How is that?"

"It is all mighty clever, if the game is what I think it is; mighty clever."

"I asked Sammy if he'd mind keeping some sort of tabs on the outfit for me while they were there. I gave him to understand that we weren't interested in them exactly, but in another person who was known to them and would probably go there to see them."

"That was all right."

"And then I followed the old party into the café again, and saw him consume another lot of booze. Not quite as much as before, however. Well, we had been there about an hour when a hall-boy came through the place shouting, '*Gen-er-al Mal-lory!*' You know how they do it."

"Yes."

"The old general sang out, 'Here, boy!' and was handed a card; and then he told the boy to 'Ask the gentleman if he won't step right in here? Bring him here. We can talk here as well as anywhere.'"

"He brought him, I suppose."

"Yes; and the funny part of it was that it was the same chap who had been in the Egyptian room with the daughter. More than that, they appeared not to know each other when they first met. I didn't think it was put on, either. It all looked very real to me."

"Well? Well?"

"The old general was right about their being able to talk there as well as anywhere, for I couldn't get within forty feet of them, so to speak. They talked for about another hour, and seemed once or twice to get rather excited about it. The old man consumed more whisky, and the other chap didn't take anything but White Rock water. Then he went away."

"Who did?"

"The younger one; the good-looking chap. The old man stayed where he was about ten minutes more, and then up he went in the elevator again."

"It was then about half-past five o'clock?"

"It was six. I had a notion of coming home, but I thought I'd stick a little longer, but I didn't see another sign of any of them till almost eight—or about half-past seven, it was. They all came down together then."

"Who do you mean by 'all'?"

"Father, mother, and daughter."

"What sort of looking woman is the mother?"

"Very matronly, very handsome, very dignified, with black eyes as sharp as needles; eyes that take in everything in the room at a glance. Eyes and face and skin and carriage that appear years younger than you would suppose her to be at first glance."

Nick nodded.

"That about fills the bill," he said. "Now, what happened next?"

"They seated themselves together in the ladies' corridor as if they were waiting for somebody, and after a while that somebody appeared. Who do you suppose it was, chief?"

"I haven't the least idea. Who was it?"

"Clarence Vaughan."

"What?"

Nick Carter half-started to his feet, and then sank back into his chair again.

"Clarence Vaughan, eh?" he mused aloud. "So *he* is to be their victim! Well, Patsy, you have done remarkably well. You have developed the very circumstance that I wished most to know. I suppose they all went in to dinner together; no?"

"They did, and stayed there till ten o'clock. Then they came out, Vaughan said good night, and went away, and the Mallorys went to their rooms—for the night, I suppose. Anyhow, I thought it was time for me to let up; so I came home. That's the report."

"Patsy, I'm proud of you. If you had not hung on as you did, you would have missed the one important thing of the whole affair. As it is, I shall know better now how to proceed."

CHAPTER VI.

TEN-ICHI MAKES A GOOD PLAY.

It was past three o'clock in the morning when Ten-Ichi came home; but Nick Carter had waited for him because he wanted his report before he retired.

"Well, Ten-Ichi, you have had a hard day of it, I'm afraid," he said to his Japanese assistant.

"I couldn't truthfully call it an easy day, chief. You see, I hadn't followed my man very far before I discovered that he was onto me; knew he was under surveillance."

"Oho! That call from the upper deck put him wise, didn't it?"

"I think that must have been what did it. Anyhow, he was wise, all right. I suppose he put two and two together before he left the ship. He knew your name was Carter, didn't he?"

"Yes; but——"

"Of course he never suspected that your were *Nick* Carter at first; but I think, chief, that after that call came to him from the upper deck, it put him wise on the spot. When he went back aboard the ship, he probably did it to get a good look at you, to make sure that you were Nick Carter. At least, that is my idea."

"I think you are right about that, Ten-Ichi. But go on with your yarn."

"I saw that he understood that I was following him. I also saw that he didn't seem to care. In fact, he acted as if he was rather pleased than otherwise that he was under espionage. That puzzled me."

"I think I understand it, Ten-Ichi; but go on."

"I made up my mind, anyhow, that I'd make him think that I only wanted to locate him; so I made no bones of keeping along with him—he took a car, you know, and then the subway—until I landed him at the Mastodon."

"He went there, did he?"

"Yes. I saw him register, and watched the boy take him up to his room, and then I lit out about as fast as I could travel for my friend, the hair-dresser. It was the nearest place where I could fix myself up. When I came out of there I was an old Japanese general, or the representation of one, and I looked the part, all right. Lefevre loaned me a couple of his bags, which I filled with a lot of truck, and he called a cab for me, and I drove straight to the Mastodon in a hansom and registered. I am General Boku."

"Good! Go on."

"By good luck, when I got out of my cab and entered the hotel, Bergen—that's his name—was standing right near the desk. He saw me come in and saw me register—and he didn't tumble, either."

"It was a good play."

"I had to carry it out to the end, though. That was the bother of it. I had to go to the room that was assigned to me, and leave my man standing there in the office. I was afraid he would go out before I returned—and he did. When I went down-stairs again, he was gone.

"However, I lighted a big cigar and seated myself in the lobby, or whatever you call it, and waited; and while I was waiting a special delivery letter was brought in for him, and a boy went around calling out, 'Mr. Bergen! Mr. Bergen!'; but he didn't show up for another half-hour, so I have no idea where he was during that time."

"Go on."

"He came in about ten minutes after that letter arrived, and it was given to him at once. I think he swore some about its contents. I couldn't hear him, but he looked as if he was swearing while he read it."

"It was doubtless the letter that was written at the Holland House," mused the detective. "Go ahead, Ten-Ichi."

"He read it through a couple of times, and then he tore it into little bits and threw part of them into one receptacle and part in another. Then he went into the café and took a bottle of White Rock and sat down to think.

"That thinking consumed about an hour. By the way, I forgot to tell you that while I was at the hair-dresser's, I fixed myself so that I could dispose of the old general at a moment's notice, and blossom out as a young Frenchman. My eyes are not so slant but what I can do that all right."

"I know."

"All I had to do was to take off the gray wig and the tuft of whiskers, and put on a half-sprouted mustache, with a tuft on my under lip, change my hat, and it was done."

"That was well thought of."

"It wasn't very long before my man went out—on foot. I followed him in a cab, and while in the cab I made the change to the young Frenchman."

"Did he go to the Mammoth?"

"Yes. He met the young woman that Patsy followed—met her in the Egyptian room."

"Did you see Patsy?"

"Sure."

"Patsy didn't see you."

"I kept very much in the background. I don't think that Patsy noticed me at all."

"Well?"

"The young woman was waiting for him in the Egyptian room when he arrived, and they went over into a corner. For a few moments I guess the fur flew between them. The woman was mad about something—or frightened. Maybe it was that."

"I think it was."

"They calmed down presently, and just as they got to talking amicably together, Patsy put in an appearance. I saw him coming and drew back out of sight."

"He went right inside the room, he tells me."

"Yes. They didn't notice him or suspect him at all. I could see that. But I knew from the position they occupied that I could not get near enough to hear anything, and I thought it best, since Bergen is so wise, not to attract his attention to me."

"That was right."

"I left the game to Patsy then, and strolled around outside, looking at the books on the news-stand, and all that. He was with her about an hour."

"That agrees with Patsy's report."

"I saw when he was about ready to take his leave, so I stepped outside the hotel and waited on the steps. The consequence was that he went past me without seeing me at all. I had kept the cab, so I got into it again and followed him in that. What do you think he did?"

"You will have to be my informant, Ten-Ichi."

"He just went around the end of the block to the other entrance to the hotel, and entered it again from the other street."

"That was when he sent his card to General Mallory, I suppose."

"Exactly. That is part of Patsy's report?"

"Yes."

"I suppose he told you how they sat in the café talking for a long time—about another hour?"

"Yes."

"Well, when he had finished there he walked back again to the Mastodon. He went into the writing-room and wrote a letter, which he sent by a messenger to a gambling-house in Forty-fourth Street. I forgot to say that I had now resumed the Japanese general's rig."

"All right."

"Well, there wasn't anything doing after that for a long time. We just sat around and did nothing at all, until—I think it was a little before six that a messenger brought him a letter. It was written on Hotel Mammoth paper."

"It was from Miss Mallory, then."

"Probably. When he read the letter, he smiled as if he was well pleased. Then he tore it into bits as he had done with the other one, and as before put part of the pieces into one receptacle, and the rest into another."

"And then——"

"Then I suppose he discovered suddenly that he was hungry, for he went into the big café and ordered his dinner. I waited a few minutes, and then I sauntered in and ordered mine. I sat at the adjoining table, facing him."

"That was a little bit reckless, wasn't it?"

"Well, something happened that made me think so, for I hadn't been there more than three minutes when he arose deliberately and came over to my table."

"He was onto you, Ten-Ichi."

"No, he wasn't. But he had his doubts about me until I set him straight."

"Tell me about it."

"He stopped directly in front of me and said, 'General Boku, I believe?'

"I admitted that I was General Boku.

"'I think we arrived at the hotel at about the same time,' he went on, 'and I take it that we are both alone. Will you accept my card, sir?'

"He handed me a card which bore the name of Melville Bergen, and then he dropped down quite naturally into the chair opposite me and began to talk. I want to tell you right here, chief, that I have never heard a more interesting talker than that fellow. He charmed even me by his powers of conversation. He could talk a nun out of a convent."

"What did he talk about?"

"Anything. Everything. He has been all over the world, or at least you would suppose so. He knows Japan almost as well as I do, and speaks very fair Japanese, too."

"What was he talking at?"

"That gambling-house to which he had sent the letter."

"Oh! He was playing the capper, eh?"

"Not at all. That is the queer part of it."

"Well, go on."

"He finally asked me if I was at all familiar with New

York. I told him I was. That I had been here many times and knew the city very well indeed. He said:

"'Then you won't misunderstand me if I make a very odd request of you, I know.'

"I thought that a little bit strange, and asked him what it was. He replied:

"'I am a man who has the fever of gambling in my blood. There are times when the call of the tiger is so strong within me that I cannot resist it. Like all gamblers, I am superstitious. I have just sent a note to a gambling-house to say that I am going over there to play against them to-night, and I want company.'

"I raised one hand in protest, but he went on quickly:

"'Now, don't misunderstand me, general. My superstition would not permit me to take you there as my guest to-night, unless you agreed with me that you would not play yourself, and would not stake anything at all through another. It is merely that I want your company; that I want the company of a Japanese gentleman. Now, the cat is out of the bag. Will you go with me for a little while under the conditions I have named? You do not know me, but the people at the desk will tell you that I am on the level.'

"'Do you mean,' I asked him, 'that you believe you will win just because you have a Japanese officer in your company, as your guest?'

"'Just exactly that,' he replied.

"'Very well,' I said; 'I will go with you.'

"Well, chief, after that we did not part again until a little while ago."

"Did you go to the gambling-house with him?"

"I did."

"And he played—and won? Is that the idea?"

"He won twenty-two thousand dollars. He was going to stop at twenty, but he made one last bet of a thousand dollars, and won that, also. I never saw such luck in my life."

"So now you are good friends, eh?"

"The best in the world—and I must get back to my room. Will you send around an outfit in the morning, to the Mastodon, for General Boku?"

"You bet I will, Ten-Ichi."

CHAPTER VII.

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN'S DEFIANCE.

"So!" mused the detective aloud, after Ten-Ichi had left him. "The prospective victim is Clarence Vaughan."

One would have thought that after the fatigues he had endured, Nick Carter would have sought his bed now, when the time was approaching four in the morning; but it did not even occur to him to do so.

As a matter of fact, as he had expressed it himself, he was away ahead on his sleep, for he had done but little else on the voyage homeward—and just now he wished to think out the problem concerning Clarence Vaughan.

He knew Clarence Vaughan very well indeed—had known him, "on and off," many years. They had never been intimates, in any sense of the word, but they had always been friendly.

Vaughan was the inheritor of great wealth—and he was no longer a youngster, although he had remained a bachelor. Nick figured that he must be between thirty-five and forty years old; a dangerous age for a man where a designing woman, ten or fifteen years younger than he is, determines to win him.

And Nick had already seen enough—and heard enough, too—of Imogene Mallory—if that were her name—to realize that she could make herself extremely fascinating if she chose to do so.

Vaughan was alone in the world, save for one sister who was many years younger than he.

"I wonder where Mabel Vaughan enters into the calculations of the plotters?" he thought, leaning back in his chair and puffing slowly at his cigar. "I don't believe that Mabel is more than twenty—or, at the most, twenty-two years old now. I think I will make it my business to look Vaughan up some time during the day that is coming.

"It is very plain to me that Melville Bergen is not an important factor in this case at the present time. His game is to remain entirely in the background while 'Rita,' as he calls her, does the work; but all the same it is a good idea to leave Ten-Ichi in the character of the Japanese general. There is probably considerable to be learned in that quarter.

"I wonder"—he smiled to himself as he expressed the thought—"if it would not be an excellent idea for me to enter the lists as a rival of Vaughan's for the affections of the beautiful 'Miss Mallory'? I wonder——"

He laid his cigar aside and stretched his feet out upon the footrest before the grate fire, closed his eyes—and slept.

It was seven o'clock when he awoke to find that Joseph had entered the room and was standing respectfully beside his chair.

"I have prepared your bath, sir," he said. "I thought you would wish to be awakened now."

"Yes, Joseph. That's right. I think I was too lazy to undress, and this chair and the fire was so comfortable that—well, I am as thoroughly rested as if I had gone to bed."

He came from his bath a few moments later and hurried to his dressing-room, where for half an hour he swung his Indian clubs, worked with three different weights of dumb-bells, punched the bag, and disported himself on the parallel bars; and after that he returned to the bathroom and stood under the shower until he

was thoroughly cooled; and then Joseph rubbed him down, first with a coarse towel and then with a silk one.

Such was Nick Carter's habit every morning when he was at home; and when he was not he usually found some sort of substitute for his exercise.

"Clean body; clean conduct; clean clothing; clean conscience!" These comprehended Nick Carter's rule of living. And right here let me say that those who would emulate him would do well to write down those eight words and read them over every morning upon arising.

The morning, unlike the preceding day, was bright and beautiful—and warm, for it was near the last days of March. Nick knew Clarence Vaughan for an early riser whose habit it was to ride in the park every morning, and so as soon as he had finished his breakfast he telephoned to the stable to have his own horse brought around—and at nine o'clock he was riding swiftly along the bridle-path through Central Park, hoping that somewhere, before he returned, he would encounter Clarence Vaughan.

However, he made the distance to Mount St. Vincent without meeting him, so he turned his horse about and started back again over the same course.

He had ridden cityward perhaps half a mile slowly, when, upon turning a sharp bend in the path, he came suddenly upon him—*and riding beside him on another of Vaughan's horses was that charming young woman who called herself Imogene Mallory.*

If Nick Carter could have foreseen such a meeting as this one, he would have avoided it. But it was too late to do that now. They were within a hundred feet of one another when they came into view, and Vaughan was quick to recognize the detective.

"Hello, Carter!" he exclaimed, and reined in his horse. "Wait, Miss Mallory, please. I want you to meet—— What? You know each other?"

Nick had raised his cap and Miss Mallory was bowing to him with a smile on her charming face.

"We were fellow passengers on the voyage home," she said to Vaughan. "I hope you have recovered from the effects of the voyage, Mr. Carter?" she added.

"Oh, yes; thank you. In fact, there were no effects to speak of save that possibly I slept rather too much."

"I thought that you kept yourself rather aloof from the other passengers," she said to him, smiling again. "I supposed it was natural reserve; now I find that it was only because you were sleepy."

"Had I known, Miss Mallory, that you did me the honor to consider me at all, I should have remained awake during the entire voyage. I thought it was you who were reserved."

Vaughan laughed aloud.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "It looks to me as if you were both engaged in considering the other one. Turn about and ride with us a little way, Carter, won't you? I have something on my mind that I wish to tell you; and, by Jove! I'm so happy this morning that I would like to take all the world into my confidence."

Nick turned a quickly inquiring glance toward the young woman, and saw that she had flushed and was biting her nether lip with some annoyance; and then while he turned his horse around, he saw Vaughan lean toward her and whisper a question, to which he heard her reply:

"Certainly; if you like. I think, however, he has already guessed."

"Carter," said Vaughan, as they rode onward, "you shall be the very first to hear the glorious news. Miss Mallory has consented to become Mrs. Vaughan. I am to resign my bachelorhood for the dearest bondage that a man could find."

"This is very bright news on a very bright morning," said the detective. "I hope that I may venture to congratulate you both; and I think now that I understand the reserve which Miss Mallory practised aboard the steamer. She was thinking of you."

"Sure. She promised me at Palm Beach that she would give me her answer as soon as she returned, and I went last night to get it; and then she put me off again until this morning. But it is all settled now."

"May I inquire if you have gotten so far in your arrangements as to fix a date for the ceremony?" asked Nick.

"Well, hardly that; although we are agreed that there shall be no delay. I will confess that I am impatient, now that I have broken down the barriers, so to speak. We were arguing that very point when you came upon us. I was saying—now hush, Imogene!—that there is no reason in the world for delay, while there is every reason for practising expedition. I look to you, Carter, to help me out in the argument. Miss Mallory doesn't need a trousseau any more than a hen needs three—er—feet. She and her father and mother are living at a hotel. I can go to Sherry and give him an order, and he will have everything in shipshape for us in no time. A few written invitations could be sent out—we don't want a gang at the wedding, you know; we're agreed on that much—and the thing could be pulled off next Wednesday evening just as well as not. Don't you agree with me, Carter?"

"I think," replied Nick mildly, "that it is entirely out of my province to agree or to disagree. I can only refer you to Miss Mallory, with the remark that now, if ever, her wish should be a law unto you."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter," she said. "The fact is that Clarence is so impetuous about it that he doesn't recognize any law whatever—not even my wishes."

"Oh, well," said Vaughan, with some impatience. "If you really think, Imogene, that we *must* wait a week or two longer, I suppose we'll have to do it."

"And on the other hand," continued Miss Mallory,

calmly, and as if she had not heard him, "there is some justice on his side of the argument. My father has some business in France—something about the building of a tunnel somewhere, I believe, although he is supposed to have retired—and he is very anxious to get away. In fact, he told me last night that he should be obliged to sail within the week, and of course if he did that, I would have to go with him. So——"

It was a significant pause that she made here, which Vaughan was quick to take advantage of; and he exclaimed:

"So you see the argument is all in my favor, after all. I'm not going to let the general take you to Europe with him; that's settled. We have plenty of time to make the necessary arrangement, and all you've got to do, Imogene, is to say yes, and let me go ahead."

"Mr. Carter"—she appealed to him laughingly, but Nick could see that there was intense uneasiness underlying her words—"will you not advise me? Should I consent to what he is asking?"

"Really, Miss Mallory, you place me in a very delicate position. I make it a rule never to mix in family quarrels, and, as this seems to be your first one, I would be foolish, indeed, if I had the temerity to express an opinion. I will say this, however—to you; not to Vaughan—I should, if I were you, decide this important point entirely upon the basis of contentment, peace of mind, happiness, and self-approval for the future."

"Good Heaven, Carter, why don't you go into the church?" exclaimed Vaughan. "With such lofty ideals to preach from, you'd be a crackerjack!"

Then they all laughed, and the incident passed off; but Nick saw that his words, spoken with a double meaning, had made an impression upon the girl.

He knew, also, that she would consent to Vaughan's request to be married the following Wednesday evening, or would throw over the whole plot against him and disappear with her supposed parents—and he understood, as they rode onward in silence, that she was considering those very points.

As a matter of fact, he could almost read her mind; and what he read was this:

"How much does this man Nick Carter know? Bergen was right in his supposition that he is the detective by that name. How much does he know? Was it he who called out that name of mine which I supposed was unknown to any person on the ship? Can he suspect anything of the plot that is afoot, of which I am the instrument, and Vaughan the victim? Can he have any idea of the true relations which exist between Birge and myself? Shall I dare to go ahead, and carry the scheme out to the end, now that it has advanced so far and the prize is practically in my hands? Or shall I dismiss the whole thing, and disappear?"

That was about what Nick thought her meditations to be as they rode onward.

She flushed and paled; paled and flushed; but at last, just as they came in sight of Mount St. Vincent, she turned with something of defiance in her brilliant eyes, and, having bestowed one quick glance upon the detective, she swept them around to Vaughan, and said:

"It shall be as you wish, Clarence. Next Wednesday evening if you choose it so."

"*Glory!*" Vaughan almost shouted. Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"Am I to receive one of those written invitations?" he asked.

"You bet your life you are, Carter. Aren't you our first confidant? You shall be best man—that's what!"

"Wait, Clarence. I cannot do that. Remember how uncertain I am. I am likely to be called away at any moment, you know. No; I cannot even consider it, thank you for asking me. And now, may I leave you to yourselves? I know you don't want a third party around, just now. I will look you up at your club late this afternoon, Vaughan."

The detective raised his cap then, and rode away.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AT BAY.

Nick Carter was rising from the luncheon-table in his own house at one o'clock that same day when Joseph entered the room and placed a square envelope in his hands, announcing at the same time:

"It was brought by a messenger, sir. He is waiting for an answer."

The detective broke the seal and read:

"DEAR MR. CARTER: The incident of this morning when Mr. Vaughan so impulsively took you into his confidence—or shall I say *our* confidence?—has made me wish very much to have a chat with you. Do you think that you can pardon the apparent boldness of this request, and come to me at the Hotel Mammoth at three o'clock? Your consideration will be appreciated deeply by

Yours most cordially,
"IMOGENE MALLORY."

"March, the twenty-ninth."

The detective read the note twice before he recalled the fact that a messenger was waiting to take back a reply and that Joseph was also waiting.

"Tell the messenger to say 'Yes.' That is all that is necessary," he said shortly.

Under ordinary circumstances he should, of course, have sent a written reply; but he did not regard this as an ordinary circumstance, and he believed that the very curtness of his response would put another spoke in the wheel of Imogene Mallory.

"One never knows or even guesses what a woman will do next," he mused, as he went to his study; "and this is certainly an extraordinary move on her part. She means

however, to see me before I have a chance to keep that late-afternoon appointment with Vaughan, at his club. The situation is rapidly developing interest."

At three o'clock precisely he sent his card to Miss Mallory, and at ten minutes past three he was invited to go to her in her private parlor on the tenth floor.

She received him alone, and it was instantly evident to the detective that she had gotten herself up especially for that occasion, and that she intended, before they parted, to practise every wile of which she was a master upon him.

And now she was, indeed, beautiful—beautiful with an indefinable charm that was as alluring as it was elusive.

Her eyes were as bright as stars; her hair shone like burnished copper; her skin suggested the richest cream; and there was around and about her a subtle fascination which he had never supposed she could possess.

And she received him with all the dignity of a queen, and yet with a subconscious suggestion of familiarity that was intensely alluring.

"The general and mama have gone out for the afternoon," she said, as she indicated a chair for him to be seated. "My maid is in the third room from here, so we are alone. It was very kind of you to consent to come to me, Mr. Carter."

"I am still at a loss to know why you sent for me, Miss Mallory," he replied. "The request came to me like a bolt out of a clear sky. Is there some service that I can perform for you?"

"There is, Mr. Carter. A very great service, indeed."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

"I want you to tell me why you don't like me."

Nick smiled. He was not at all prepared for this question, which seemed at once to go at the root of things; but he met it, nevertheless.

"You astonish me, Miss Mallory," he said, "for the truth is that I *do* like you very much, indeed."

"Then your actions belie your words."

"How so, if I may ask?"

"You do not approve of my marriage with Clarence Vaughan."

"Am I in a position to approve, or to disapprove?"

"Tell me the truth—*do you?*"

"No. I do not."

"Tell me why."

"Do you still wish the truth?"

"Yes."

"The naked truth?"

"Yes."

"Very well. There are several reasons why I do not approve of it, but one will suffice—one that should be sufficient for you."

"Tell me what you mean."

"I would save you from yourself, Miss Mallory."

"You would—save me—from myself!"

"Exactly."

"I do not understand you."

"Pardon me, Miss Mallory—you have sought this interview, and you have asked for the truth. If I say things to you which give offense, you have only yourself to blame for it—I think you *do* understand me, thoroughly."

"Really, sir——"

Nick left his chair.

"Shall we close the interview?" he asked.

"No, no, no! Please be seated. Please tell me what you mean?"

"I mean that you should not attempt to carry out the plans you have made concerning my friend Clarence Vaughan. It is sufficient—more than sufficient—that you have made him love you, and so, for a time at least, have cast a shadow over his life; for I know Vaughan very well, indeed. His is not a heart that he wears upon his sleeve, to be dropped and picked up again at will. It is a good heart; a strong heart; a loyal heart; a loving heart in every consideration he has for those who are dear to him. I will not stand by and see him victimized. . . . Wait, pelase. . . . I say this to you as a warning, before you go too far upon the road you have elected to travel."

She was staring at him in wide-eyed amazement, and her breath was coming and going rather quickly, as if her emotions at the moment were almost more than she could master.

"Mr. Carter——" she began, but he raised one hand and stopped her.

"Let me finish what I was saying, Miss Mallory. I began this statement by making the remark that I would save you from yourself. I meant that."

"But please explain it."

"If you were quite frank with me, it would need no explanation. You are a very beautiful woman, Miss Mallory. I am willing to believe that you are also a good woman; but I do know that you stand at this moment upon the brink of a precipice over which you are deliberating a plunge which would end in your ruin and your death. That is plain talk. Need I put it any more plainly?"

"I think you need—yes," she replied, with some haughtiness. "You are 'willing to believe that I am also a good woman.' Pray, sir, have you any reason to believe that I am *not* a good woman?"

"I have not—at the present moment. But I have reason to believe that you are contemplating an act which would make you a bad woman," was the calm reply, delivered with his eyes fixed upon hers.

"This is insufferable!" she half-gasped.

"You have brought it upon yourself."

"Do you refer, in that remark you just made, to my contemplated marriage with Clarence Vaughan."

"I do."

"And why may I not become his wife?"

"Because you are already the wife of another man," was the cool response.

She started to her feet with a low cry. Her left hand flew to her bosom and was pressed there firmly; and after a moment she gasped:

"It is not so! It is untrue! It is false! It is——"

"Your husband came north on the same ship with you," continued the detective, mercilessly. "You have had at least one interview with him since your arrival. You and he have plotted together to make Clarence Vaughan your victim. You want his millions. You love this man whom you call Birge, and you do not love Clarence Vaughan. You——"

"Stop!"

Nick stopped; but he added quietly:

"You see, I know whereof I speak, madam. I would have spared you this had you chosen to accept my hint, in the beginning; for I do believe that your impulses are good, and that the only sin there is in you is visited upon you because you are tied to a scoundrel and a blackleg whom you have the misfortune to love."

"Oh! That I should have to sit here calmly and take this from you!"

"I repeat—you brought it upon yourself. You need not have sent for me. You would not have sent for me at all, had not your intuition told you that I was better informed than you wished me to be, for the success of your plans."

"And if I had not sent for you—what then?"

"I would have found a way to prevent the wedding; that is all."

"So you intended to save me from myself, in any event?" she asked ironically. She was now recovering her poise, and Nick saw that a hard look had come into her eyes. He saw then that she was a woman who could be persuaded to anything, but who could be driven not at all.

"No; I would have saved Clarence Vaughan from you. For you, if you persist in the course you are pursuing, there can be but one finality."

"And what is that, pray?"

"Ask yourself. Or, rather, let me ask you this question: If I had not interfered—if the contemplated marriage had been consummated, how long would Clarence Vaughan be permitted to live, after that wedding ceremony was performed?"

"Great Heaven! Would you charge me with contemplated murder?"

"I know that murder has been contemplated in this plot of yours."

"No, no, no, no! Not that. Not that."

"I know that you objected to it. I know that you do not look upon it with complacency. I know that you have exacted a promise that it shall not be done—but I also know that in your secret heart you know that that promise will not be kept."

"And all this—all these things with which you charge me—how do you know them, or think that you know them?"

"That is an unimportant element in the affair. It makes no difference how I know them. It is quite sufficient that I do know whereof I speak."

He left his chair, crossed the room, and took up his hat and coat, which he had thrown aside upon entering.

"And now, Miss Mallory," he said, "I will still address you so, for your private affairs do not concern me so long as you keep within certain bounds. I will leave you to think over what has passed between us. I know that you will see your own way out of the difficulties that have arisen. If you persist in following the course you have been pursuing, I can assure you that I shall show no mercy—to you, or to those who are associated with you. If you withdraw while there is yet time, you will save yourself from prison, at least."

"You are going now to keep your appointment with Clarence Vaughan?"

"Yes."

"And you mean to betray all this to him—do you?"

"No. For the present I shall tell him nothing. I think you will be wise enough to get out of it in your own way, and I am disposed to give you the opportunity. I will keep silent until Wednesday morning—and forever afterward, if you do as you ought to do. I bid you good afternoon, Miss Mallory."

CHAPTER IX.

ONE PHASE OF A WOMAN'S WILES.

The detective's interview with Vaughan was not at all what he had originally intended it to be, because of the interview just had with Imogene Mallory—we will continue to call her by that name since she is known to us by no other.

Nick was rather glad, too, that it did not now seem necessary to warn his friend of what was impending.

He had hesitated to do so all along, for he knew that Vaughan would not take it kindly—in fact, he doubted if he could make him believe.

But now, since the talk with Imogene, there seemed to be no necessity that Vaughan should be told anything at all.

Nick believed that the woman's wit would find some way out of the difficulty, since he had given his promise that he would not betray her until after she had had an opportunity to withdraw gracefully, at least.

It never occurred to him that she would not withdraw; that she would adopt some other means of carrying out the purpose that had been formed.

Having the certain knowledge that he possessed the information that he did, concerning her, he could not conceive of her doing anything else but packing her trunks and disappearing to new fields of conquest.

He had told her the truth when he said that he was willing to believe that she was still a good woman. He recalled the conversation he had overheard on board the steamer—that murmuring talk in which her love for the man who was with her was revealed; in which her abhorrence of the crime that was contemplated was outspoken.

She was a superior woman, physically and mentally. Her misfortune had been brought upon her by loving and marrying a scoundrel such as Bergen undoubtedly was.

But now that she had stepped so near to the precipice and had so nearly gone over it to certain destruction, Nick believed that the horror of her position would be brought home to her as soon as he left her, and that she would lose no time in decamping from the scene.

But in all this he reckoned without the influence of Bergen.

He believed, of course, that she would send for him at once, or go to see him—but he did not believe, that with the consequences of what she was about to do, plainly before her, she would be prevailed upon to persist in her course.

And so the interview with Vaughan was short, and of no moment.

Clarence could discuss nothing but the new happiness that he believed had come to him. Like all men who live as bachelors until they approach middle age and then fall madly in love, he could see nothing but the golden lining to the clouds; the blackness of the opposite side was not to be considered.

When Nick left the club where he had called upon Vaughan, he took a sudden notion to visit the Hotel Mastodon, where Bergen was stopping, and where Ten-Ichi was posing as the Japanese general—and at five o'clock he entered there.

But neither Ten-Ichi nor Bergen were to be seen anywhere about, and so, having left word for Ten-Ichi—addressed of course to General Boku—to the effect that he would like to see him at the house as soon as he could make it convenient to go there, he went on homeward.

It was half-past six when Ten-Ichi came; and at once Nick said to him:

"Well, Ten-Ichi, I suppose that about four o'clock your friend Melville Bergen received a summons to go to the Mammoth, did he not?"

"Yes; and invited me to walk around there with him. I waited in the corridor while he went to the tenth floor. He did not tell me who he was calling upon, but of course I knew it was the Mallory woman."

"Of course."

"He was with her until almost six. When he came down again he was so preoccupied that he was barely civil. We had had an engagement for the evening—were going to a theater together—but he told me that he would have to beg off. He said that a matter of considerable importance had arisen which would require his presence elsewhere, and asked me to excuse him."

"Very good. Have you any idea of the time he intended to go out?"

"No; I only know that he had just ordered his dinner, to be served at half-past six, when I came away. He is safe to be an hour over it."

"I am going to send Patsy back to the hotel with you. He is ready now. I want you two to keep tabs on everything that Bergen does to-night—if it is possible to do so between you; and I don't want him to suspect that he is watched."

"I guess we can do that."

"I am not so sure of it. The things that happened to-day to annoy him, and which made him break his theater engagement with you will also make him believe that his every act will be watched to-night. I want you to be prepared to tell me in the morning of everything that has happened to-night."

"All right. What about the woman?"

"I am of the opinion that by following him you will also follow her. That is one reason why I want Patsy with you. Now, go, or you may lose him. He may cut his dinner short to-night, although I know of no reason why he should be in a hurry—unless he suspects that General Boku is not all that he appears to be."

"Oh, he doesn't suspect that."

"You cannot know what his suspicions are, Ten-Ichi—and he is a very slick article."

The detective ate his dinner, and was again just rising from the table, when the second letter from Imogene Mallory of that day was brought to him.

"Dear Mr. Carter," it said. "I must ask you to come to me again, if you will be so good. I was naturally under great excitement while you were here to-day, and was scarcely conscious of the great kindness in your manner toward me. But after your departure—when I could think calmly of all that you had said to me, and of all the consideration you showed to me, who deserved none at all, I was led plainly to see the errors by which I was—am—almost engulfed.

"I want to thank you for all your kindness; but, more than that, I want a few words of advice from you, which I know you will be glad to give me.

"There was an appointment with Clarence to-night; I have sent him word that I cannot keep it. It is my intention not to see him again at all—to let him think as ill of me as he will, rather than—but why go into all that? Will you come to me? Will you give me the advice I seek? I sent for another person this afternoon—you may guess who it was—and the advice I received from that quarter ended in a quarrel. This is the last favor that I shall ask of you."

It was signed "Imogene Mallory," as the other letter had been. In a postscript she added: "I shall expect you at nine-thirty."

And so at nine-thirty o'clock Nick Carter again sent his card to the suite on the tenth floor of the Yarmouth.

As before, he had about ten minutes to wait before word came down that he was to go to the suite, and, as before, when he entered the room, Imogene was alone.

She rose and came forward to meet him, and Nick thought that her eyes showed traces of recent weeping; it was certain that she was pale and distraught, and was not at all the splendidly beautiful woman that she had been in the afternoon.

"Thank you for coming," she said impetuously. "Thank you *so* much. After all that happened to-day, and my exhibition of ingratitude, I could hardly hope that you would accede to my request."

"I will be glad to do anything that I can for you, Miss Mallory, if you are only sincere in your determination."

"I am. I would not admit to-day that you were right—that you were correct in your statements; but I do admit it all now."

"You see, I had the advantage of *knowing* that I was correct."

"Yes," she murmured.

"And now, what is it that you wish me to do for you?" asked Nick.

"I want you to help me to get away from here. I wish to go to-night—at once. That is, I must be gone within an hour from now. I will tell you frankly that I have quarreled with my—with Mr. Bergen. He has gone back to his hotel—the Mastodon; but he is coming here again for me, in the morning. I don't wish him to find me here. I wish to go at once—now!"

"But your father and mother——"

"They are not my parents. They are only a part of this plot. Help me to get away. Will you do that?"

"Yes. I will do it. Where do you wish to go?"

"I have a friend—in Brooklyn—to whom I can go. I have already sent a special delivery letter there. But I do not know that she is at home. I have no means of knowing. And it is a lonely place to go alone—for me—in the night-time."

"I will go with you and see you safely there; that is, if you are of the opinion that it is the best place for you to go."

"Oh, there can be no doubt of that. It is the only place where they will not seek for me. Not one of them knows of this friend of mine. She will take me in and care for me until I can make arrangements to go abroad."

"Will you tell me her name?"

"She is Mrs. Seymour."

"And where does she live? Whereabouts in Brooklyn is it?"

"It is a long way. It is at Bath Beach."

"We will take the subway, then, and the elevated in Brooklyn. That——"

"Oh, I am so afraid to do that. If we should meet Mr. Bergen somewhere—— Don't you think we could go in

a carriage? At least, as far as the bridge? I should be terrified if I should encounter him again."

"Yes. We will go as far as the bridge in a carriage. From there, we will take the elevated. Are you ready to start at once?"

"Yes. In a very few moments."

"Your baggage—what about that?"

"I have packed my trunks and sent them down to the storeroom of the hotel, to be kept until called for. I shall take only a suit-case with me to-night."

"Then if you will get ready we will start at once. It is ten o'clock now, and it will be midnight before we can get to Bath Beach, as it is."

"It is so good of you, Mr. Carter."

"Never mind that. I am glad to be of service to you, if it will keep you out of the wickedness you were contemplating."

"You did not tell Mr. Vaughan about that, did you, Mr. Carter?"

"Certainly not."

"He knows nothing whatever about it?"

"Nothing whatever."

"And others? Have you told others?"

"I have told nobody."

"Except, of course, your assistant; no?"

"I have told nobody; not even my assistants. They, of course, know that you and Bergen are under suspicion, and they know that Vaughan is in some way connected with it; but they do not know how, nor why."

She darted into an adjoining room, and quickly returned, having donned her hat and coat; and then, with a last look around her, she opened the door.

"Come, Mr. Carter," she said.

And the detective followed her from the room.

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE WALKS INTO A TRAP.

Inside the coupé, Imogene retreated to the far corner of it, where for a long time she remained utterly silent. It was a silence which the detective respected and which he did not care to interrupt; but presently, when he heard her sobbing, he spoke to her.

"I wouldn't do that," he said kindly. "You have better reason to rejoice than to sob."

"Oh, you do not know—you do not know what you are talking about!" she cried out, half-wildly. "Let us go back. Order the horses—order the driver to turn around and take us back again. I must not go on. I must not go on."

"Nonsense!" replied the detective.

She shuddered, and seemed to try to draw still farther away from the detective, and again for a considerable time there was silence. Then, suddenly—for she seemed now to have become a creature of impulses—she drew herself away from the corner and snuggled her warm body up closely against Nick.

"Put your arm around me," she whispered. "Put your arm around me and hold me—hold me tightly."

"But I must not do that," he replied. "What nonsense are you talking now?"

"If you don't, I will scream out, or leap from the coupé. Hold me. I am half-mad—half-mad, I think. Put your arm around me and hold me."

She snuggled up still closer to him, and he did as she requested, whereupon she breathed a sigh of relief, as if she had found strength and safety in that strong arm.

After a little she spoke again.

"How do you know that I am not leading you into some trap?" she demanded; but her voice was low, and rather plaintive.

"I confess that I had not thought of such a thing," replied the detective.

"But suppose it were so—what would you do?"

"I have been led into a great many traps during my life, Miss Mallory, and I have somehow always managed to get out of them again. Why do you speak of such things?"

"Because Bergen wanted me to do that very thing. When I told him that you knew all the details of the plot, he was for killing you at once. Oh, it was terrible. I had an awful time with him."

"You are doing a very wise thing in leaving him."

"Yes, I know. I wish—oh, how I wish that I had never seen him. My life might have been so different. I might have made it all roses and now it is all thorns. I am a wicked woman—a wicked woman, Nick Carter. I wonder if you will find it in your heart to forgive me when you know how wicked?"

The coupé drew up at the bridge at that moment, and there was no opportunity for Nick to answer the question; and in the change from the vehicle to the bridge, and thence to the train for Bath Beach, he forgot all about it.

They took seats far forward in one of the cars, and Imogene did not speak again until they were pulling out from the Atlantic Avenue station. Then she said:

"Have you ever wondered how a person must feel who commits suicide by leaping into the Niagara River, above the falls? Have you ever wondered how such a person must feel when the current takes him or her in its grasp and hurries them toward the brink of the cataract?"

"I don't know that I have ever particularly considered the subject," he replied.

"That is the way I feel now, Mr. Carter. I am in the river above the falls. The current has seized upon me. It is rushing me downward, downward to my destruction. In a little while more I will have gone over the brink, and then—oh, Heaven! what then!"

"You are overwrought. You are talking foolishly."

"Not so foolishly as you think. I wish you would promise me to remember one thing about me."

"Well, what is it?"

"I wish you would promise to remember that there was something—one thing—that I wanted to tell you to-night—that I want to tell you now—but that I cannot. Will you?"

"Yes."

"I have tried to tell you ever since we left the hotel. I thought—there in the coupé—when I asked you to put your arm around me, that I could tell you; but I could not. My lips would not form the words, my tongue would not utter them. Lips and tongue are controlled by a will that is stronger than my own. It is the current of the deadly river that is carrying me over the falls."

"Look here, young woman!" said Nick, speaking sternly. "You have got to pull yourself together. You are getting rattled. It won't do. The excitement of the day has been altogether too much for you. Brace up now, and be yourself."

She straightened up at once, and then she looked around at him and smiled.

But it was a smile that had tears in it. The expression of her face was strained. She trembled even as she tried to smile, and again she nestled closer to him notwithstanding the fact that they were in a brilliantly lighted car.

"Tell me how you found out the secret of that awful plot," she murmured presently.

"I hardly know the answer to that myself," he replied. "The revelation came to me in an incomprehensible manner. It was a great mystery to me then. It is almost as great a mystery now."

"Tell me about it."

"The information came to me while we were still aboard the ship—it was the last night before we arrived in New York."

"Yes?"

"I overheard you and your—you and the man you called Birge—discussing it. He was in your room, I think; or you were in his."

"He came to my room; but how could you have heard us? We conversed almost in whispers, and you could not possibly have heard us from beyond the door, or from an adjoining room."

"I was at least two hundred feet away from you, and yet I heard plainly almost every word that passed between you, after my attention was once attracted to the conversation."

"But how could that be possible?"

"I only know that is the fact. Tell me, were you not seated in your room, facing each other, and was not one or both of you leaning against the hog-frame—what you would call a huge beam, probably—that passes through that room?"

"Yes," she replied, raising herself erect again, and turning toward him in utter astonishment. "One would suppose that you saw us as well as heard us. He was seated upon an ordinary stool; I upon a camp-chair. We faced each other, with our heads very close together. We both leaned our heads against that big beam. Why? How could you know that?"

"And I," replied the detective, "was lying in the berth in my own room. The top of my head was pressed against that same beam, which is what is called the hog-frame of the vessel. When you talked, the sound was conveyed to me through that beam, just as if it had been a telephone-wire. That is how I learned of your plot."

"But—I cannot understand it."

"Neither can I—more than to say that it was somehow charged with electricity from one of the dynamos, and that it acted as a conductor. But I heard only the last part of your talk. The first part escaped me. I did not know whom you were plotting against. I did not know—then—in what room you were talking. The only clues I received were the names 'Rita' and 'Birge.' Where do you get the name of Rita?"

"My first name is Clarita. Imogene is my second name."

"And your last name is—what? I don't mean your married name—your maiden name is what I want."

"You have it. It is Mallory."

"And who is General James Mallory? And who is the woman you called mother?"

"General Mallory is really plain James Bergen—Melville Bergen's father. The woman is his second wife."

"So it was really a family affair, after all."

"Mr. Carter——!"

"Well?"

"I wish you would take me back again to the hotel. I wish you would not let me go to the place where we are going. I wish——"

"What nonsense are you talking now?"

"Please."

"To fall again under the influence of those people? No; you engaged my services to take you to Bath Beach, and that is what I am going to do."

"But if trouble should come of it—if you should get into trouble because of it?"

"Oh, well"—he laughed, for he did not take her seriously at all. He thought of her merely as overwrought, and not entirely responsible for all that she said and did—"it wouldn't be the first time that I have gotten into trouble—and got out again."

"And you will forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you—all the trouble that I may cause you?"

"You may consider yourself forgiven, I think. See, we are almost there. Is the house far from the station?"

"Yes. It is quite a walk. The house stands quite alone, on a lonely street."

"All the streets out here are lonely at this time of the night. Come. Here we are."

They left the train together, and paused for a moment on the narrow platform. Another train—a down train—was just pulling in at the station, and Imogene was looking at it with fascinated gaze. Then suddenly she turned to Nick and made one last appeal.

"See," she said. "There is a train that is going back to the city. Let us get aboard of it and return. Please do. Please."

"What! After we have come all the way out here to find Mrs. Seymour? Well, I should say not. Come along. Which way is it?"

He was obliged to use some force to turn her away from her evident desire to return to the city by that incoming train; and she sighed deeply when he did so, and then appeared suddenly to resign herself to the inevitable.

"A few days of rest will do you a world of good, Miss Mallory," Nick said to her; but she exclaimed petulantly.

"Don't call me by that name. I hate it! Call me Imogene. Nobody ever called me that but my father, and he died when I was six. That is the street that we must follow. It is the last house on the right. It is almost a mile from here, straight out into the country; at least, it seems like country."

"You say you sent a letter?"

"Yes."

"Then you should be expected."

"I think there will be no doubt of that."

Nick wondered a little at a queer intonation to that reply of hers, but he thought no more about it, and they went on in silence after that, until the house was before them. There was a light in one of the windows, and in the hall, and Nick stepped upon the piazza with Imogene, and rang the bell.

There was a moment's wait after that, and then the door was opened by a negress, who looked inquiringly out upon them.

"Is Mrs. Seymour at home?" asked Nick. "Here is a friend of hers who would like to see her."

"Yassir. She is, sure 'nuff." She turned away and threw open a door at about the middle of the hallway, revealing a room with a light in it. "You all jes' walk right in dar, and I'll done call her right away, suh."

Nick stepped forward and entered the room indicated, expecting that Imogene would follow directly behind him. That is, he crossed the threshold—then he turned, for the appearance of the room was not to his liking.

But as he turned, the door was banged shut, leaving him alone in the strange room, and he realized instantly that he had been duped—that he had deliberately walked into a trap—that he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FACES AT THE WICKET.

There was absolutely no window in the room in which Nick Carter found himself so strangely a prisoner. In the middle of the ceiling there was a small shaft which ascended to the roof, where there was a small skylight;

but the shaft was not large enough to have admitted the passage of the body of a half-grown boy.

Solid walls surrounded him everywhere, save where the door by which he had entered was located; and just as he turned his attention to that, the electric light went out, and he found himself in utter darkness.

But he had his own little pocket-light with him, and he produced it. It would serve him while he made a thorough inspection of his surroundings, he thought.

The inspection, however, was not promising, for he speedily discovered that the door was of iron, cased with wood probably on the outside.

But inside it was plainly enough iron, and good, substantial iron at that, with no effort at concealment.

He had heard no less than three locks click in the door when it was closed upon him, so he knew it to be fastened at top and bottom and in the middle. The hinges were out of view, somewhere in the casing, so he could not get at them. The door opened in, so there was no hope that he could burst it open.

"'Walk into my parlor,' said the spider to the fly,'" he quoted grimly. "It strikes me that I have been about seven different kinds of a fool to-night. I am just about as certainly a prisoner in this room as if I were locked up in the Tombs—and just about as thoroughly a prisoner, too."

There was a cot in the room, two chairs, and a small center-table. That was all the furniture it contained; so now he seated himself upon one of the chairs, sought in his pockets for a cigar, found one, and lighted it.

"I reckon about the only thing that I can do is to await developments," he muttered, as he smoked calmly. "I haven't heard a sound of any kind since the door closed and the bolts of the locks were shot into place. I wonder what's doing outside.

"That girl didn't want to run me into this trap, either; but the powers that rule her are stronger than she is. I can see now what a fool I was not to take her at her word. She meant it when she asked me to take her back to the city. She could have told her confederates that I refused to come over with her.

"This is what she meant when she said she wanted me to remember that there was something that she wanted to tell me, but could not. This is what she meant when she asked me to forgive her for all the trouble she had caused me and might yet cause me.

"I know now why she asked me to put my arm around her, while we were in the cab; she was in hopes that the act would give her the necessary courage to warn me of this business.

"There is a strange mixture of good and evil in that young woman; but that infernal scoundrel Bergen has got her entirely under his thumb. She wanted to tell me, and she could not. 'Her lips refused to frame the words; her tongue refused to utter them.' That is what she said.

"I suppose there is no Mrs. Seymour at all in this place—unless that old aunty bears that name. I suppose also that Bergen and that scoundrelly general are out there somewhere, at this minute, laughing to think how they have trapped Nick Carter.

"It's a very complete trap, too. No pistols or bludgeons about the thing; just a nice, strong room, capable of holding a lunatic, or a detective." He laughed grimly.

"I shouldn't wonder if that is what this room was built for, originally—a lunatic. Some family has lived here who had a crazy person for a member of it; they disliked asylums, and this room was built purposely. That is about the only way of explaining its existence."

There was a plate on the table containing two sandwiches, and there was a bottle of beer beside it, Nick discovered in one of the flashes of his light. He avoided them, however. It occurred to him that they might be poisoned. He recalled that conversation he had overheard aboard the ship, and he knew that Bergen had very little regard for human life if it happened to stand in his way.

"I don't see what good it will do them to bring me out here and shut me up, unless they intend to murder me," he mused, as calmly as if he were discussing the possible fate of another person entirely. "If they don't put me out of the way, I am bound to escape some time, and, of course, they must know that I would down them all the moment I get my liberty. Yes; it is a cinch that they intend to do away with me somehow. Hello!"

The electric light was suddenly turned on again.

"I expect there is an interview of some sort about due now," thought the detective; and he was not mistaken.

A moment passed, and then a square wicket in the middle of the door was pulled open from the outside. It was large enough so that Nick might have thrust his head through it; but not larger. After another moment the face of Melville Bergen appeared at the opening.

"Hello, Carter!" he said, pleasantly enough. "How do you like your quarters?"

"Rather cramped, thank you."

"Still, you can be quite comfortable in there, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. I suppose so."

"Sorry, old man, to put you to this inconvenience. If you had been content to mind your own business and leave other people's affairs alone, it wouldn't have happened."

"I suppose not."

"You're a man of your word, Carter, and I know that you keep your word when you give it. If you will promise hands off of our affairs forever, I'll open the door now, and you can walk out a free man—and escort Imogene back to the city again, if you like."

"The inducement you offer me is extremely alluring, Bergen, but I believe I will think it over a bit first."

"You had better do your thinking rather quickly, then, for we are going to light out of here right after breakfast. By the way, you needn't be afraid of those sandwiches there. We are not disposed to do you any injury—yet. If you will break off a bit of either one of them, I will eat it to show you they are all right. Or I'll take a swallow of the beer, if you happen to be suspicious of that."

"Some such suspicion had occurred to me, I'll admit," smiled the detective, "but I believe now you have dispelled it."

"To-morrow will be Sunday, Carter."

"Yes. So I am advised."

"Then there will be Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and all day Wednesday before the wedding."

"There is approximately four days, I believe."

"Exactly."

"What of it?"

"Only this. If you don't make up your mind about that promise before we leave here in the morning, you won't see me again till after the wedding."

"Ah! And then——?"

"Why, then I will give you another chance."

"I see. And if I should still be inclined to delay—or to refuse to make the promise?"

"Well, in that case things might be a bit unpleasant for you. We couldn't afford to take any chances after that, you know. It would be altogether too late."

"I suppose so."

"Why don't you make the promise now, and come out and have supper with us? Do that, and we will all return to the city together. My automobile is just around the corner."

"I think, if it is all the same to you, that I would rather consider the matter. You see, putting aside the mere imposition of the case, as you propose to play it, the life of my friend is at stake."

"Not at all. All that is changed. I have given Imogene my word——"

"I am afraid that your word isn't as good as you say mine is."

"Well, perhaps it isn't."

"Suppose you step away from that wicket and let me talk to your wife—to Imogene. When I see your face so prominently there, Bergen, I'm strongly inclined to send a bullet through it—I really am; and see! I could do it easily enough."

He stretched out his right hand as he spoke, and a pistol seemed to materialize in his grasp. It was surprising how quickly Bergen dodged away from that opening. Nick laughed aloud, and, quoting his captor, added: "But I won't do it—yet."

A moment later and the beautiful face of Imogene appeared at the wicket.

"You wished to speak to me?" she asked. Nick saw that she had been weeping, and despite the trick she had played on him, he felt sorry for her. He saw in her only a tool of the man who molded her to his will.

"Yes," said the detective. "Do you realize what you have done to me?"

"I tried to send you back. I tried to make you take me back. I even tried to tell you all about it; but you would not go, you would not take me back, and I could not tell you."

"But I ask you again, do you realize what you have done to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you realize that you have condemned to death a man who tried to befriend you?"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"But it is yes, Imogene."

"But you will make the promise that Birge asks you."

"I will never make it."

"Not to save your life?"

"Not to save ten of my lives, if I had so many."

"You—you said you would forgive me."

"Oh, yes. I forgive you. Why should I not forgive you? You are only a tool, and a very unwilling one at that. Your heart is not bad. Your impulses are for good. Do you intend to go ahead with that marriage? Do you still mean to become the mock wife of Clarence Vaughan, Imogene?"

"I must. There is no help for it."

"Do you realize that you will be committing two deliberate murders, when you do it? Have you thought of all that?"

The effect of that question was the same as if he had struck her in the face with his fist, for she sank backward in a heap upon the floor, in a dead faint.

"Poor girl!" said Nick; and he turned away and picked up one of the sandwiches, for already he saw Bergen spring toward her and lift her from the floor where she had fallen.

She revived almost as soon as he raised her from the floor, and Nick could see her through the wicket as they assisted her to a room at the rear of the hall. A moment later Bergen reappeared.

"Is there to be any more gun play, Carter?" he asked, while he was still out of sight.

"No. It wouldn't do me any good to shoot you through that hole in the door. It might be a very great service to Imogene, however. Bergen, do you know I believe you to be about the most despicable and objectionable scoundrel I ever heard of. I can understand how a man can become a thief, a pickpocket, a murderer, or even a blackmailer; but how a man who looks as much like a man as you do, can descend to the depth of selling his wife—and *such* a wife—is a phenomenon of creation which I never expected to encounter."

There was such infinite scorn in the detective's tones that Bergen turned first red, then white, and then he abruptly closed the wicket and fastened it.

A moment later the lights in the room went out again, and Nick, having eaten the sandwiches, threw himself upon the cot and composed himself to sleep.

He remembered that there were still four days, almost, before the wedding would take place, and he recalled the fact, also, that he had put Ten-Ichi and Patsy both on the track of this man. Much could happen in four days—and Ten-Ichi and Patsy would not have been idle while on their assignment.

CHAPTER XII.

NICK CARTER PREVENTS A GREAT CRIME.

But there was one thing which the detective did not take into consideration when he recalled the fact that he had ordered Ten-Ichi and Patsy to go upon Bergen's trail. That was that it was half-past six o'clock when he gave them the order, and that Ten-Ichi had already told him that Bergen had ordered his dinner at the Mastodon, to be served at half-past six.

It is true that it was Ten-Ichi's opinion that Bergen would be at least an hour in disposing of his dinner, and he therefore thought there was plenty of time to return to the hotel; but the fact was that when he and Patsy arrived at the hotel together, Bergen had disappeared, and nobody knew whither he had gone.

They sought him at the Mammoth, but they did not find him.

Ten-Ichi even went to the extremity of visiting several of the gambling-houses where he had gone in Bergen's company, but nowhere did they succeed in obtaining a trace of him.

He had gone to Brooklyn, of course, to prepare for the arrival of Nick Carter, when Imogene should lure him there; but neither of the assistants could guess that, for thus far Brooklyn had not been an element in the game at all.

As a last resort, at ten o'clock, Ten-Ichi sent up his card—as General Boku—to General Mallory; but only to be informed that the general had gone to the theater with the madam.

"It is too bad," said Ten-Ichi to Patsy. "I suppose the very things are doing to-night that the chief most wants us to find out, and here we are up a tree right at the start."

They little supposed what was doing, and what an opportunity they had missed in not being on hand to follow the man when he left the hotel.

At eleven o'clock Ten-Ichi called up the house and asked for Nick, only to be told by Joseph that the chief had gone to the Mammoth to call upon Miss Mallory.

Ten-Ichi and Patsy went back there together, and Patsy found Sammy, the clerk, at the desk.

"Have you seen Mr. Carter in the hotel to-night, Sammy?" he asked.

"Yes. He was here about nine-thirty. He went out about ten with Miss Mallory. Looked like it might be an elopement, too; they had a suit-case. I think they took a cab or a hack. You might ask the carriage clerk."

Patsy did ask him, and was informed that the two had been driven to the Brooklyn Bridge; beyond that fact, the driver of the coupé knew nothing.

Patsy and Ten-Ichi went home, disgusted.

In the morning Nick did not appear. The forenoon wore away, and still nothing had been heard from him. The afternoon and the evening followed suit in the same manner. Then Patsy got busy.

"It's a plant, that's what it is," he said. "I'm going to make a call upon Miss Mallory."

He went to the Mammoth; he sent up his card—and received word that Miss Mallory was out.

He waited, and an hour later he sent up his card again—and was again informed that the young lady was not in.

Then Ten-Ichi, in his character of Boku, appeared on the scene. He had been at the Mastodon awaiting the return of Bergen—and Bergen had appeared. But Ten-Ichi could ask nothing of Bergen which would be inclined to give his character away; he could only watch him, and there was no satisfaction in doing that, since Bergen did nothing to make it worth while.

Patsy went home again, hoping that Nick would show up during the evening. That was Sunday night. But he did not do so

Monday morning came, and he was still absent. Patsy hung around the house until two in the afternoon, and then he went again to see Miss Mallory. This time she received him. She was apparently studying the card diligently when he entered the room, and Patsy noticed that when she raised her eyes, she studied him just as intently.

"I don't think that I have the pleasure of your acquaintance," she said coldly. "What is it that you wish of me? You sent your card to me twice last evening. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain."

"I want to know what you did with Nick Carter," replied Patsy bluntly.

"What I did with—whom?"

"He went with you in a coupé to Brooklyn Bridge, at ten o'clock Saturday night. He hasn't been seen by anybody since then. What became of him?"

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"It is quite true that Mr. Carter escorted me as far as the bridge, Saturday evening," she replied slowly. "He even put me on one of the trains of the elevated road. Did you think, perhaps, that I had swallowed him?"

"I do think that you have led him into some trap—you and that pal of yours who is down at the Mastodon," retorted Patsy boldly. "Look here, Miss Mallory, it won't do you the least bit of good to do the high and mighty with me. I have been on your trail ever since you landed from the steamer. I followed you here from that steamer. I don't know all of your game, but I know enough of it to make you mighty uneasy. I know, too, that cards are out for your marriage to Clarence Vaughan, and I know that for some reason Nick Carter intended to prevent that wedding. I don't know what the reason was or is, but I can find out, and I'm going to do it. I'm no Chesterfield, and I'm no fool, either. You and your pals have managed in some manner to get Nick Carter out of the way—at least for a time. If you won't give me the information I want, I'll take my own way of procuring it, and it won't be a pleasant way for you, either."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"You'll find out what I'm talking about."

"I know nothing about Nick Carter more than I have told you. I will thank you to excuse me from prolonging this interview."

Patsy had to get out. There was nothing else to do. His bluff hadn't worked, and he was thoroughly aware of the fact.

He waited until ten o'clock that night, and then went to Brooklyn Bridge himself—that was Monday night—and by dint of diligent inquiry he finally became satisfied that Nick and the Mallory woman had taken a Bath Beach train Saturday night, shortly before eleven o'clock. He took one, also—he tried to get the same train, if possible, and he succeeded.

Then he went through the cars, talking with the guards. He described Nick and Imogene to them, and mentioned the dress-suit case—and the result was that he left the train at the same station where they had done so. Then he went back home.

Tuesday morning he was at Bath Beach bright and early, and he spent the entire day and part of the night going about the streets and making careful inquiries. Nothing came of it.

Wednesday morning he was there again, and this time the quiet residents of that district—some of them—decided that he was drunk or crazy, for he went about the streets rapidly, and at intervals of a few minutes he shouted out an old signal-cry that he and Nick had used often enough for Nick to recognize it if he should hear it.

The day passed into the afternoon and the afternoon well on toward evening, when, from a house far out at the end of one of the streets, he thought he received a reply. It was very faint and distant, but he believed he heard it.

He stopped and repeated his call; and again he was only half-assured of a reply. He uttered it a third time, and listened again—and then he ran to the front door of that house and rang the bell.

A negress came to the door, but Patsy did not wait to ask her questions. He brushed her aside as if she did not exist and rushed into the hall.

"Nick! Nick! *Nick!*" he called, with all the strength of his lungs.

"Here, Patsy, here!" came the answer, close at hand. He turned, and he discovered the wicket in the door. He opened it—and he peered into the eyes of his beloved chief. He turned savagely upon the negress.

"Get me the key to this door!" he demanded.

"Deed, suh, I ain't got it," she replied.

"Then get me an ax—and do it quick or I'll cut your heart out."

The ax was brought, and five minutes later the woodwork around the casing of that door was chopped away, and Nick Carter stepped out into the hall.

"Come, Patsy," he exclaimed. "We haven't a moment to spare. The wedding is due at nine, isn't it?"

"Yes. We can get there."

And then a remarkable thing happened. As they ran out upon the steps, an automobile dashed up at the door, and Ten-Ichi leaped out of it to the pavement. It was Nick Carter's Peerless car.

"Great Scott, Ten-Ichi, how did you find us?" exclaimed the detective, as he leaped into the car over the wheel. "Sit here in front with me and tell me about it."

"I was sent to find you," explained Ten-Ichi, as the great car shot forward, heedless of speed regulations. "The woman repented. Imogene Mallory came to me less than three hours ago and told me where you were—gave me full directions how to find you. She implored me to get here in time—to bring you to Pulaney's before the ceremony could be performed."

"To Pulaney's? I thought it was to be at Sherry's."

"No; there was a change. She told me to repeat a message to you, word for word. It was this: 'Tell Mr. Carter to forgive me. Ask him also to protect me if he will, for Melville Bergen will kill me when he finds out what I have done to betray him.'"

"All right," said Nick; and the car drove on in silence.

When they were approaching the hotel Mastodon, on Fifth Avenue, in New York, Nick looked at his watch.

"We've got fifteen minutes," he said. "Wait inside the car," and he pulled the machine up to the curb and leaped out.

From there he ran through the corridors to the café, and, as he had hoped would be the case, discovered Bergen calmly seated at one of the tables.

Nick did not utter a word. He ran to the table, seized Bergen's arms, jerked them behind him, and snapped handcuffs on his wrists; and then, almost before Bergen had recovered from his surprise sufficiently to protest, he jerked him around and sent him on a run in front of him, out of the building, lifted him from his feet, and tossed him unceremoniously into the tonneau.

"Hang on to him, Patsy," he called out; and then he started the car for Pulaney's.

In three minutes he was there.

"Bring that scoundrel with you, lads!" he called out to his assistants. To the man at the door he said: "There is a wedding-party here to-night. Take us to it instantly. I am an officer. I am Nick Carter;" and he shoved a bill into the man's hand.

One moment later he threw open huge folding-doors in front of him, and, leading the handcuffed captive by the scruff of his neck into the very center of the room, he called out:

"This wedding cannot proceed! The bride is the wife of this man here—this man who is my prisoner, charged with half a dozen crimes."

And then, before the assembled company could recover from the shock, he added, in a kindly tone, which was intended—and which did—to give a false impression:

"Imogene, your husband is alive, as you see. It is for you to thank Heaven that I arrived in time to prevent this wedding."

And Imogene, with one glad cry, collapsed upon the floor.

THE END.

The next issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY (548) will contain "A Dead Man at the Feast; or, Nick Carter's Very Slender Clue."

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RANCH AND RANGE LIFE

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which letters are written by those entirely familiar with life on the prairie ranches, and who would laugh to scorn stories by an author whom they knew never could have ridden a bucking bronco. Make up your mind to try for these golden prizes right away. Even if you fail to secure one of the twenty leading prizes, we expect to send a splendid consolation offering to every one who competes. Let us know in what way these tales of the Wild West appeal to you, and what you have done to influence your boy pards to read them regularly.

¶ The competition is open from April 1 until October 1, 1907, when the prizes will be awarded, full name and address of every winner being published in the **Rough Rider Weekly.**

HERE ARE THE PRIZES

$10 in Gold for the Best Letter.
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$2.50 in Gold for Each of the Six Next Best Letters.
$1 in Gold for Each of the Ten Next Best Letters.

¶ The letters should not be longer than 250 words and should be plainly addressed to "Manager of Rough Rider Letter Competition," care of Street & Smith. Now, boys, jump in and resolve to win a cash prize.

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How the Early Numbers of the TIP TOP WEEKLY May Be Secured

TO the boys who take interest in the adventures of Frank Merriwell and want to read everything that was written about him, we desire to say that numbers 1 to 325 of the **Tip Top Weekly** containing his early adventures are entirely out of stock and will not be reprinted. These numbers, however, were published in the Medal Library beginning with No. 150 which is entitled "Frank Merriwell's School-days." We give herewith a complete list of all the Merriwell stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing.

We will send a complete catalogue of the Medal Library, which is just full of good things for boys, on receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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Published About May 27th

413—Frank Merriwell's Search.

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